STREET & SMITH'S

UNKNOWN

APRIL
1939
20c

THE ULTIMATE ADVENTURE
by L. Ron Hubbard

IS IT *Magic*— IS IT A MIRACLE?

Amazing Luster-Foam "Bubble Bath" gives Super-cleansing in delightful new way

MIRACLE? Magic? Strong words, these, but research men say Luster-Foam deserves them. Even more important, thousands of everyday women and men agree. We hope that you will also, when you try the new formula, Listerine Tooth Paste, supercharged with Luster-Foam detergent.

The new, different way Luster-Foam detergent cleanses the teeth is due to its amazing penetrating power . . . its startling ability to go to work on remote and hard-to-reach danger areas where some authorities say more than 75% of decay starts. You know them—areas between teeth, on front and back of the teeth, and on bite surfaces,—with their tiny pits, cracks, and fissures which retain food, acid ferments and bacteria.

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1. *Quickly sweeps away food deposits and new surface stains.* **2.** *Attacks film which dulls the natural luster of the teeth.* **3.** *Aids in preventing dangerous acid ferments which hasten decay.*

While such complete cleansing takes place, you are conscious of a feeling of delightful freshness in the entire mouth—and that freshness lasts!

If you want luster that dazzles, start using the new formula, Listerine Tooth Paste with Luster-Foam. In two economical sizes: Regular 25¢, and Double Size, 40¢, actually containing more than ¼ lb. of this new, mouth stimulating dentifrice. Lambert Pharmacal Co., *St. Louis, Mo.*

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• • •

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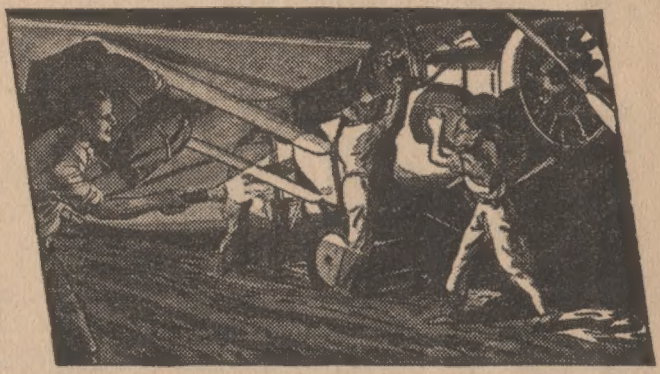
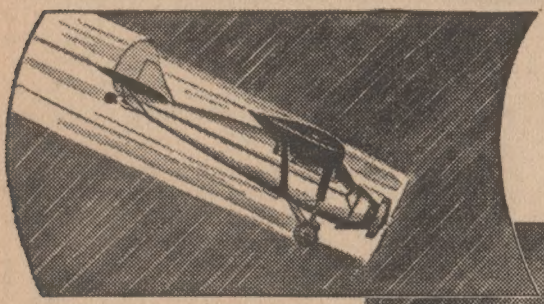
Flying Blind—4 FEET *from* DEATH

TROPIC DOWNPOUR BRINGS ADVENTURE TO ROUTINE FLIGHT

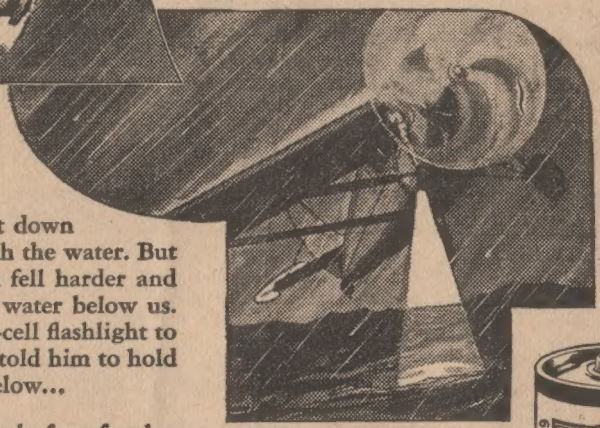
OLEN V. ANDREW



1 "I had flown four friends over to Lihue, on the island of Kauai, for a weekend of camping on the beach," writes Olen V. Andrew, P. O. Box 3295, Honolulu, T. H.



2 "We broke camp at three o'clock Monday morning, packed our dunnage in the plane and crawled in for the 100-mile hop back to Honolulu, all of it being over water. There was no moon, but the night was clear when we started. Five minutes later...



3 "...we ran into a driving rainstorm. I couldn't fly over it, I didn't have proper instruments for flying through it, so the only thing to do was to get down low and keep visual contact with the water. But it kept getting darker, the rain fell harder and harder, till we couldn't see the water below us. I handed my big 'Eveready' five-cell flashlight to the fellow in the co-pilot's seat, told him to hold it out the window and flash it below...

4 "...and there was the sea, only four feet below us! Those long Pacific rollers were almost lapping at the wheels! My heart skipped a beat to think how I had brought five people within inches of their doom! Certainly it was the power of those 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries that saved us all, and that kept us safe above the sea for the next half hour till the storm lifted. You can take it from me, I don't fly without 'em.

(*Signed*) Olen V. Andrew"

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* DATE-LINE

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STREET & SMITH'S

UNKNOWN

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Cover by Graves Gladney. Illustrations by: Cartier, Gilmore, Isip, Orban, Rogers.

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OF THINGS BEYOND

The difficulty of defining the type of material UNKNOWN is to handle recurs constantly. With authors, it is difficult enough, and, from letters I have received, it appears that you who read the first issue had doubts. There was, about the letters, an air of "I have glad hopes, but have been disappointed too many times to believe." The general reaction seems to be expressed in one letter asking "Will you keep UNKNOWN at par with this first issue, or will you soon descend to zombies, werewolves, vampires, charnel houses and other rigamarole of current pulps?"

This issue furnishes a partial answer. The complete and final answer is that the third issue is better than the two so far presented, and the fourth and succeeding issues will be better yet, as more and more authors learn our policy and write for us. Part of that policy is that zombies, werewolves, vampires and such items are not going to appear just for their own sakes. Robert Bloch has a nice little vampire story coming up next month—The Cloak—but it definitely is not vampirism for vampirism's sake.

We do not have the slightest intention of dealing with remote and unpleasant godlings with penchants for vivisection on beauteous and hapless maidens, just for the sake of discussing such godlings.

UNKNOWN is a totally different kind of magazine, and it's going to **stay** different. We are not going to use 19th century ghost stories, with 19th century trimmings. We are not going to begin stories "Had I known what horror faced me that night, never would I have set forth on that fatal journey—" or "They say I am mad, but I am not mad. Just listen to my story, and you shall judge—"

Which being somewhat settled, we move on to the next issue. Steve Fisher has done a very nice job on "Returned from Hell." A man looked like the traditional devil, became interested in old superstitions of devil-worship, and tried it out. Perfectly meaningless and harmless, of course— Mere superstition—

H. W. Guernsey has an interesting story about "The Missing Ocean." The captain couldn't find the Atlantic Ocean, which might seem a hard thing to misplace.

And, of course, L. Sprague de Camp concludes the bold adventures of the Second Son of the Duke of Poughkeepsie. It's amazing to consider, after finishing that yarn, what great inventions simple things really are. Flea powder, for instance.

THE EDITOR.

I WILL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a

GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute,
Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a RADIO EXPERT. I will send you my first lesson FREE. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical knowledge become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Why Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over $50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning.

How You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud-speaker installations. This 50-50 method of training—with printed instructions and working with Radio parts and circuits—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you with a professional instrument for full time jobs after graduation.

Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for sample lesson and 64-page book. They're free to any fellow over 16 years old. They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my training in Radio and Television; show you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 9CD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

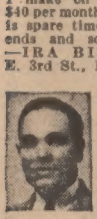
Here's Proof

Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M——— Furniture Co., for their four stores."—JAMES E. RYAN, 1535 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

$40 a Month in Spare Time

"I have a very good spare time trade. At times it is more than I can handle. I make on an average of $40 per month profit, and that is spare time working week ends and some evenings."—IRA BIVANS, 218½ E. 3rd St., Rock Falls, Ill.



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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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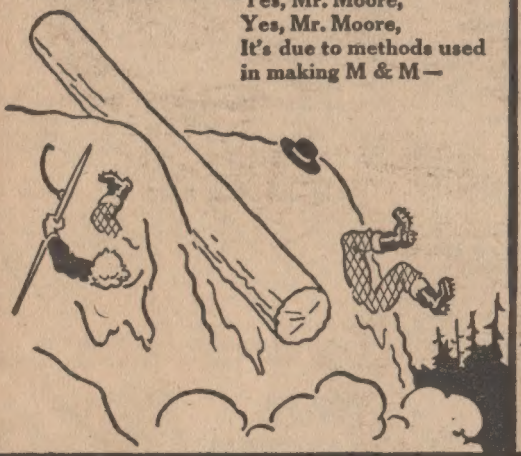
Mr. Mattingly & Mr. Moore fall into a fine whiskey value!



PEOPLE everywhere are singing the praises of Mattingly & Moore—because it is *tops* in mellow flavor, but *low* in price!

M & M is ALL whiskey, too—every drop *slow*-distilled! More—M & M is a *blend of straight whiskies*—and that's the kind of whiskey we believe is best.

Ask for M & M, *today*, at your favorite bar or package store. You'll be delighted at what a fine, mellow whiskey it is... and you'll be amazed at its really *low* price!

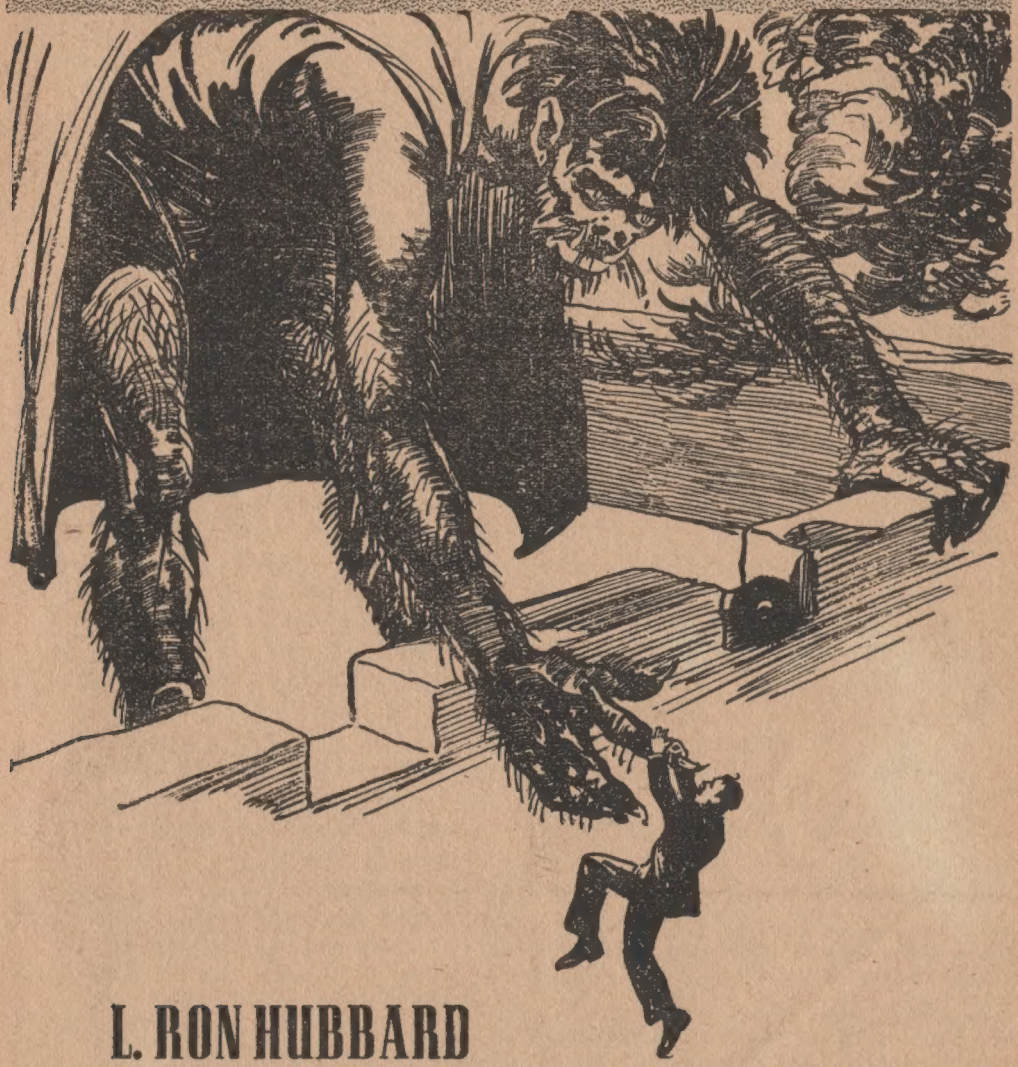
Mattingly & Moore

Long on Quality—Short on Price!

A blend of straight whiskies—90 proof—every drop is whiskey.
Frankfort Distilleries, Incorporated, Louisville and Baltimore.

This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale or use thereof is unlawful.

THE ULTIMATE ADVENTURE



L. RON HUBBARD

WHEN Stevie Jebson's aunt died, Stevie Jebson was immediately without means of support—thanks to several income taxes which managed to take at a gulp the whole of the nest egg salvaged from palmier days.

After four months of grief and desolation, Stevie realized that fate was

about to hand him starvation as well. The kitchen garden had disgorged its last turnip, and the ground itself was, this very day, to be given over to alien feet.

It was a dreary afternoon for Stevie Jebson. He shrugged forlornly into his overcoat, and into its pockets tucked a few trinkets which had more sentimental than actual value: a volume of the "Arabian Nights"—later to be greatly regretted—a fountain pen—destined to purchase his life—a pocketknife, his late father's watch—which was soon to tell him more than time—and a presently priceless box of matches. Forth he went into the chill autumn blast, brother to the dead leaves which the wind harassed mercilessly, and, because he had no destination, merely kept walking.

At midnight he was still walking, and, because he was so unused to such diversion, he became so weary that at length a park bench looked as inviting as a satin couch. Stevie sat down, wrapping the coat about him. There was so very much of the coat and so little Stevie that it was no time until he was only a light-violet shade from the cold. Morosely, he contemplated the aura the fog made about a park light, and in it, as though it were a crystal, he saw Stevie Jebson go down into a pauper's grave at a very early moment. In Shakespeare he had read about beggars, but he knew he could never stoop to begging. If he had read the papers, he might have known something about relief, but papers and Stevie had never connected beyond the religious tracts his aunt had collected and with which Stevie had sometimes started fires. Briefly he contemplated an accident which might happen to him wherein he would rescue the daughter of a millionaire from a burning building, but there were factors against this—Stevie always coughed terribly when subjected to smoke, and, besides, he would not be likely to discover a building on fire and then locate the right girl to rescue before the sun went down again.

So unversed was he in starvation that he thought he could not last through another day. Lean already, his usually well-fitting pants were now but indifferently held up, even though the buckle was down to the last notch.

He felt very sad and very sorry for himself and very much aware of the reality of this world, which demands that a man eat to live. That, to Stevie, was a foolish and thoughtless law. Much more to his liking was a diet of romantic ballads and plays on which he had subsisted since that long-ago day when his aunt had decided that the cold he had gotten at school was indicative of his frailty and consequent inability to ever again attend such a place. To the abuse of his eyes and the fattening of his brain, he had dieted as he pleased from a mid-Victorian library for the ensuing twenty years.

He thought, as he had for days, of all the beautiful meals which had been set before him unappreciated. For half an hour he iron-maidened himself with visions of roasted turkey—the only food which ever really registered upon his inattentive palate—but, finally, the strain was too great and the shock of his aloneness swept in upon him to engulf what little courage he had left. He curled his shivering slightness upon the knife-edged slats of the dewy bench and fell into harassed slumber.

Sir Launcelot smashed his feet with the flat of a mace and Merline immediately thrust the stumps into boiling oil, and Stevie woke up in the shadow of a tower of blue which, upon again applying nightstick to soles, growled: "Let's go, Jack. The world's wakin' up."

STEVIE ORIENTED himself with great difficulty as he watched the patrolman cross the gravel walk to similarly treat another wayfarer, who had been caught by dark and empty pockets.

Stevie felt the weight of the world, ton by ton, settle all its six sextillion five hundred and ninety-two quintillion tons upon his soul. Sleep dulled the aching emptiness of him, but, even so, he contemplated a cooing, strutting pigeon with speculation as to its edibility in the raw state. This thought startled him into wider awakeness. How short he was on fortitude!—he told himself. He must steel his soul to meet his imminent death without a murmur. He sighed, filled with pity for his departed dreams.

"Godda match, pal?"

It was the bum from across the way, a pasty individual who seemed to leak lard at the pores. He had culled a tattered snipe from his ash-can-salvage suit.

Stevie knew he didn't have a match, but he looked anyway, anxious to stave off that feeling of aloneness, if only for the benefit of a bum. It came to him, too, that he must now consider himself such.

"I gawon," muttered the tramp, discovering the broken cardboard tab in his hat.

"A bit chilly this morning," commented Stevie.

"Chilly," snorted the bum. "You say it's chilly and you got a whole bedroll in that overcoat. Say," he added with growing curiosity, "you don't look to me like you ought to be sleeping on benches. Wifie get sore at you?"

"No . . . no, no," said Stevie, getting it. "I am merely . . . er . . . finding myself in most unfortunate circumstances. I have neither funds nor work, and I have not eaten for some time."

"Aw, don't try to string me," said the bum. "I'm regular, see? Fishy lines don't take. Y'ain't tough enough for a stoolie and— Say, you ain't tryin' to make a contact to sell the white stuff, are you? Me, I don't indulge so save it."

"You started this," said Stevie with sudden wonder at his own courage to speak up so sharply. "I am not trying to sell . . . whatever it is. I beg your pardon." Whereupon he got up and started to walk away.

"Hey," said the bum. "No use gettin' sore. I can tip you to a free breakfast, if you can eat it."

"I am not looking for charity," said Stevie, stiffly. "If I could find honest employment—"

"Y'mean work?"

"Quite," said Stevie, not wanting to move off after all.

The bum went rummaging under a shrub behind him and finally brought forth a section of the newspaper he had used to keep his chest warm. This section he had discarded with deep contempt, but he gave it to Stevie.

"Want ads," said the bum. "If you're serious, you'll probably find something in there."

Stevie sat down, and the bum smoked at the snipe, and the pigeon cooed and strutted, disturbing Stevie's concentration. He read the columns with some surprise. People, it seemed, did employ people in various capacities and advertised accordingly. But the first wave of enthusiasm which hit him evaporated. He could not answer for any of the qualifications demanded as he had none of the repeated "experience necessary." Further, most of the ads were for salesmen, and he fell into a chilly sweat at the thought of trying to approach a man to sell him something.

At last he disconsolately laid the paper aside.

"I *thought* it wuz a stall," said the bum.

They were silent. Stevie could not keep his eyes away from the pigeon. Of course, if the fowl really wanted to be obliging it would lay an egg on the gravel, but, then, maybe it wasn't that kind of a pigeon. The technique of killing pigeons was an intricate thing, Stevie realized. Did you wring their necks, or hit their heads on the edge of

a bench? No, he could not do it. Repulsive as was the thought, he would have to accept this breakfast.

"You spoke . . . that is . . . mentioned a free meal?" said Stevie.

"Sure, you can get there in about five minutes."

"Where?" said Stevie, getting up. And then he bethought himself: "But aren't you going, too?"

"Me? Nope. Cockroaches in breakfast cereal look so awful floatin' around in blue milk."

Stevie gave a shudder. He sat down again, contemplating the pigeon. He wondered if it would squawk loud enough to bring a cop. Carefully, he slid off the end of the bench—the pigeon all unawares—and made his way toward his quarry. The bum did not notice. Stevie stopped. Two blue legs were rising like columns before his face. He started up, his one thought concentrated on a sprint. But, with a gasp of relief, he saw that this was no cop. He tried to look dignified.

THE MAN was tall and elderly, wisps of white hair escaping the rim of his black derby. He appeared to be of a very high social order from his bearing. He had pince-nez and a detached air. He took off the pince-nez and changed his manner. He replaced the pince-nez and resumed an interested study of Stevie. Stevie looked up and down himself to see what the fellow was staring at, but could find nothing wrong.

"Are you hungry?" said the stranger.

Stevie tried to keep the shout out of his voice, but even then he almost blew the stranger's hat off. "YES!"

"If you would care to be employed for a short time—profitably, too—I think we can remedy that," said the stranger.

The bum tugged Stevie's coat and growled warningly: "Watch it, pal."

Stevie took no notice. "I am very anxious to have an honest position," he stated.

"Good. But before I allow you to accept," said the elderly man, "I must warn you that this is not a very usual sort of job."

"Anything," begged Stevie. "Anything that's . . . not really dishonest."

The bum tugged harder. "Cheez it, buddy. I can tell you something about this gent. He comes tru de park every morning looking for a bum, and a couple's been took up. He's tryin' to get himself a human guinea pig."

Stevie's mind was too concentrated upon food to allow the advice to swerve him.

"It is not as bad as that," said the gentleman. "True, I wish to test a certain matter, and, though my results so far have been unsatisfactory, I may be able to promise you something very interesting, though not particularly dangerous."

"Particularly?" said Stevie, suddenly caught by the word.

"Well, no, not really," said the gentleman. "I am a research scientist in a field not generally touched upon, and, of course, I must have subjects. You do this of your own will, of course. I merely offer plenty of food and ample funds."

Food got Stevie. He nodded vigorously.

The elderly gentleman led him up the walk.

The bum shook his head and then shrugged expressively. It was none of his business what happened to that thin little kid.

II.

SOMEHOW managing to keep from eating chunks of plate or silverware, Stevie Jebson finished his repast in the beanery, almost oblivious of the tall, preoccupied fellow who sat calmly across the table from him. When the last choice stains of ham had been eradicated from the dish with a piece of bread, Stevie looked around for more

food, found none and then became suddenly aware of his stuffed fullness. He had to admit to himself that he could not have managed another bite and had been carrying on with his momentum for some little distance past his capacity. Replete with great comfort, he leaned back in his chair and wiped at his mouth with a napkin.

"Smoke?" said the tall man.

"Oh, no," said Stevie in haste. "My aunt . . . that is, I never use them, thank you." It grieved him not to be able to further please his benefactor, and he was acutely conscious of a great wish to help the man however he could. This feeling of extreme servility was new to Stevie and was, in fact, mainly an aftermath of a succor, always present for a brief moment.

"Then," said the tall gentleman, "it is probably time for us to repair to my laboratory."

"Yes, yes, indeed," said Stevie, getting up and following.

The tall gentleman paid the check, and then marched down the avenue at such a speed that Stevie's short, frail legs were hard put to keep up with him. Nothing was said for blocks, mostly because Stevie had no breath with which to state even the great well-being which filled him.

At last they came into a dingy neighborhood where the kids and garbage cans and clotheslines were drowned in the roar of trucks and gabble of gossiping women. It did not strike Stevie as particularly odd that this might be their destination, but the tall gentleman thought it might.

"Isolation," said the tall gentleman. "Buried from prying eyes, you know."

Stevie looked at all the people and wondered about it slightly. They had stopped for a moment at the foot of a tall flight of drab steps, and the people who sat upon them were suddenly silent as they stared at the tall gentleman. They knew him, that was plain, but they had no desire whatever to say anything to him. The tall man did not even notice, but threaded his way up the flight and into the cabbage-essenced hallway. He led the toiling Stevie up seven tedious flights, each one marked by its own peculiar odor of stale cooking until one could almost tell the nationalities on each floor.

At last, under the grayness of a dirty skylight, they came to another stop, and the tall gentleman put a big key in a bigger lock and opened what might better have served for the main gate of a fortress. He carefully shut and locked the door behind him.

The change was almost a shock. Here everything was shining metal and glass and silence. Not a sound leaked in from the streets below. Nor a speck of dust. The glittering interior struck Stevie as a unit, and then, gradually, he pried the various objects apart and knew no more than he had in the first place. Great retorts coiled their glass snakes across the benches. Chromium trays were spread with brightly cruel instruments. Glass cabinets bulged with strange-looking pliers and knives. An operating table spread its white stillness under the unlighted domes of massive metal lights. Against the wall of the room beyond could be seen a panel superimposed upon what looked like a great coil of copper wire. Above, two electrodes stood silent guard over the gleaming faces of instruments and meters.

Stevie advanced with cautious awe. In the far room he caught sight of a chair and stopped. It was very big, with straight back and wide arms. It was upholstered all in black with straps across each arm, its middle and its legs. Shiny copper fittings, brilliantly polished, studded the thing.

Stevie had been all kindness and light up to that instant. But once he had seen a picture of an electric chair, and this object was its exact duplicate! He whirled to the door and bumped into

a man he had not seen before. Arms gripped him and pushed him gently to the center of the room and down into a chromium armchair which, somehow, was under a beam of light.

Stevie stared at the second stranger. The fellow was dressed in an interne's apron, but one didn't notice it at first, sensing, rather, the great bulge of muscle in each arm and the thick hair which must be matted upon the massive chest. The man's head came up to a point and of his brow there was none, hair line jamming down and serving as eyebrows. The face was ghoulishly without expression, and the ease with which he had been forced back made Stevie suddenly afraid.

THE TALL gentleman was slowly changing his street coat for a white apron. Stevie abruptly realized that the fellow hadn't smiled actually at any time, that his regard for Stevie might well have been paralleled by that for a broom or mop.

The light hurt Stevie's eyes.

"Please be calm," said the tall gentleman. "It is highly unlikely that you will be seriously hurt."

"Highly—" gulped Stevie. "Seriously . . . hurt?"

"I could not run the risk of being overheard in either park or restaurant and so I could explain very little to you. You look like a very intelligent fellow; you are probably a scholar fallen upon evil times. If so, perhaps this will have a great interest for you. My name is Thomas Bolton, and I have been, in the past, a research scientist of some small note, though I am . . . ah . . . no longer connected with any institution, having come into my own money and . . . ah . . . for other reasons."

Stevie looked fixedly at the lean face and, for an instant, thought it most cadaverous. Anxiously he wondered if he couldn't think up a valid excuse to get out of this place. But he was not good at lying. His aunt—

"My investigations," continued Dr. Bolton, "are . . . ah . . . somewhat irregular, and are . . . ah . . . of a secret nature. When one leaves the track of recognized science and goes pioneering into the realms of philosophy, there are certain people who do not . . . ah . . . concur with the practice. You will, of course, reveal nothing of what you learn here. Before I have had to do with dolts, but I chose you because you appeared to be above the average intelligence. That is good for my purposes. Unless one has a quick mind upon which to work he . . . ah . . . finds it difficult to get accurate reports of . . . ah . . . travels."

"Travels?" said Stevie.

"Yes . . . that is . . . so to speak. Yes, one might say travels, although one . . . that is, doesn't exactly mean 'travels' . . . if you follow me. We are attempting interplane coexistence; that is to say, transit between degrees of existence. I," he stated with dignity, "am seeking to bridge the gap between our plane of existence and any one of the countless others which coexist with us, perhaps static but more likely similar to our own. That there are such planes there can be no doubt."

"I . . . I don't understand," said Stevie, trying to keep his eyes in their sockets. "How . . . how can a person go . . . go where there . . . ulp . . . isn't anything?"

The doctor had been aloof, but now he gave the impression of a cavalryman who cracks quirt, jabs spur and, to the blare of "Charge," snatches saber from scabbard and streaks to the attack.

"Oh, you don't!" he snapped. "Where there isn't anything!" he snarled. "See here, young man," he grated, "I didn't ask you to come here and criticize what all evidence indicates, and what far greater minds than your own have already conceived. Have you ever heard of the Veda?"

"N-no," said Stevie, cowed.

"Humph, I thought not. You have never heard of the Veda! You have never heard of the great Hindu cult, of Yogism, of the source of all Western faiths: Christianity, Mohammedanism, Mithraism. Pah! Do you know your own name?"

"I . . . I don't know," stammered Stevie and, indeed, he wasn't sure.

With haughty, onerous patience, the doctor explained: "God is all, all is God, and God is an idea. Schopenhauer, Kant, Spinoza, they all leaned on the Veda for their assumptions and added to them sufficient substance to bring the greatest adventure of all within my grasp. Have you read 'The World as Will and Idea'?" he challenged.

"N-no," said Stevie. "I s-st-started it, b-bu-but—"

"You started it!" roared the doctor. "And what did he say in his first line?"

"I . . . I forget."

"You forgot the most important line of his whole book?" yelled Bolton. "Well!" he added, bringing his voice down to a pitch where he could handle it. "He said, 'The World is my idea!' That's what Schopenhauer said. And how many know what he really meant? 'The World is my idea.' And it is, I tell you, it is! Modern psychologists, with their transference of self into another self! Bah! The self never transfers itself into anything. The self is a sponge. You see that pile of knives over there?"

Stevie did and winced.

"THERE!" cried Bolton. "You have proved it. For an instant you were inclosing knives. Think of a garbage can!"

Stevie made a slight face.

"There!" cried Bolton. "For an instant you were a garbage can."

Stevie made a worse face.

"Oh, you don't like it!" said Bolton. "But it's so. Why do you give alms to the beggar? Because you, for an instant, have taken that beggar into yourself and you, for an instant until you orient yourself, are a beggar. Do you understand? In the presence of a powerful friend you are that friend. In the presence of a doctor you are that doctor. If he is a friend, you are soothed. And in your turn you become a part of all the others who see or hear you. The world is in your mind. Your mind is made up of as much of the world as you have seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched. You are aware of objects in space and time and, consequently, you think that objects really exist in space and time."

"K-Ka-Kant said that," brightened Stevie.

"Ah, then you have read something. You know I am right. We can never know the thing as it is, but only as we sense it. Yes, that's what Kant said. Without our senses we would be without this world. But," he cried suddenly, "how do you account for crystal gazing?"

Stevie blinked.

"How do you account for men in a hypnotic state seeing scenes they have never seen before? How do you account for dreaming of places you have never been, or people you have never met or read about? Well, now we're getting some place. A man in a hypnotic state is only possessed of a small amount of his senses. He is unable to orient himself, completely. Suppose"—and his eyes glowed—"suppose a man were to lose his senses completely. What would happen then?"

"He'd be sick afterward," said Stevie.

"Bah!" snapped Bolton. "Have you no wits? As long as the inner self is alive, as long as the brain contains life, as long as the central brain is wholly uninjured and untouched, man is not unconscious. But suppose he would be fully alive within himself but still without the use of any of his senses. Sup-

pose all sense messages from the nerves of touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing were stopped before they reached the center of consciousness in the brain. Then," he said in triumph, "the man would be unable to tell where he was. For him this world would not exist."

"It would be uncomfortable," said Stevie.

"How do you know how it would be? No man in the history of the world has been relieved of *all* his senses for so much as a second. The world is an idea. It is your idea. Have you never asked yourself, 'Who am I?' 'Why am I here on this earth?' "

"S-sure," said Stevie.

"Very well," said Bolton. "Who are you?"

"Stephen Jebson."

"Humph," mocked the doctor. "Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson, Stephen Jebson—"

"Please stop!" wailed Stevie.

"Good. Who are you?"

"I—"

"There, you know now that a name is only a collection of sounds and has absolutely no meaning other than identification. You have no knowledge of who you are, why you are here, from whence you came or where you are going. And are we to suspect that you are merely of this world when you weren't in it a century ago? All I have to do is repeat my own name and I know that I am conscious of not belonging, that I am detached from this existence, that I come from another place."

Stevie, robbed of his identity, of his sureness of being, felt miserable.

"We come now," said Bolton, "to the crux of the experiment. We are going to deprive you of all your senses, and, I have no doubt, you will come back to us with a strange tale to tell."

"Me?" said Stevie, faintly.

"You," said Bolton. "The others I have had here served only to give me practice in disconnecting sense messages from the brain. They were too stupid to be more than badly shaken by the experience!"

"Shaken?" gulped Stevie.

"Only one was actually ill, and even he recovered after two months. Come with me."

BOLTON LED OFF toward the other room. Stevie got one glimpse of the electric chair and grabbed the arms of his own, staying put. Bolton suspected it. Without turning he said: "Boris."

Boris had stood with vacant eyes all this time, but now he swooped massively down upon Stevie and snatched him out of the chair like one picks up an old newspaper.

Stevie saw the chair again. He clawed and yelled: "No! No, I won't! You're mad!"

Boris dropped him into the chair and slapped the straps across his chest.

"Please," said Stevie. "Please, I don't want to go any place. I . . . I just want to stay here."

"Quiet," said Bolton, inspecting a tray of instruments and finally picking up a hypodermic needle.

"This is eucaine, isn't it, Boris?"

Boris grunted.

"Please," said Stevie, "I don't want to—"

"QUIET!" said Boris, tightening the straps.

Stevie subsided.

"I have been careful to use no drugs or otherwise which might induce hallucinations," said Bolton. "I want my data to be uninfluenced in any way—hand me that alcohol for the needle, Boris—and I am trusting your memory to give me the accurate facts."

"O-o-o-o-oh," moaned Stevie as the needle neared.

"The central nerve system of touch must be blocked," said Bolton firmly.

Stevie winced as the needle bit.

Bolton pushed down on the plunger and then went back to his tray. He picked up a piece of material which had a ropy look and pushed it under Stevie's nose. *"Chilion,"* he said, informatively.

Stevie's nose smarted for an instant, and then he discovered that he could no longer smell the iodoform in the room. He couldn't smell anything! A dark terror began to seep into him. A moment later, when he felt as though he floated in midair, he cried: "Let me go! Let me go!" But Bolton smiled in satisfaction to see the nerve block take effect. Stevie could no longer feel anything, not even the seat. He was a human free balloon! "I won't really leave here?" he begged anxiously. Bolton was affixing the copper cap. "W-wha-what is that?" cried Stevie.

"Perhaps the heart of the whole thing," said Bolton with a tinge of pride. "All is energy and energy is merely force. With this machine it is possible to translate cellular energy into fluid force so that it becomes companion to Bergson's *elan vital,* the very essence of life. Without sense messages to orient itself, body follows brain blindly and all cellular subdivisions unify and are, for the first time, totally controlled by the brain. That copper cap might be likened unto a vacuum cleaner to give you the idea. The brain must obey bodily sense messages until there are no such messages. Then, to exist, the body must wholly obey the brain. Small animals have vanished under this, and I trust it will work equally well with men."

"Y-you mean I'll v-va-vanish? But I don't want to v-va-vanish!"

"The ear plugs, Boris," said Bolton.

And all sound went out like a broken bulb. Stevie strained his eyes on the objects around him as though they were mudhooks slipping through a sandbank.

Bolton removed one stopper. "You feel no drowsiness?"

"No," said Stevie with a whimper.

"Good. You will not lose consciousness. We have made a perfect nerve block without affecting the brain. Do not forget to remember all things you may encounter. I must have this report. You understand that? Without it, how can I be sure of my own voyagings when I try?"

"When you try?" gaped Stevie.

"Of course!" cried Bolton. "Do you think I want to stay in this accursed world, disgraced and dishonored, my name dragged in the muck at every turn because my brain is too great for them? Why do you think I want to perfect this?"

"But . . . but why don't you experiment . . . on yourself?"

"I run no such chances," said Bolton. "Mine is the brain. I am too valuable to risk my own destruction."

"Destruction!" wailed Stevie.

Bolton put back the ear stopper. He and Boris withdrew across the soundproof room. Bolton's hand lingered on the rheostat for a moment and then, seeing Stevie was all right, started to pull down.

The lights faded out. Stevie felt like a ship with its anchors dragging and the cliffs just behind. The room was black. He could hear nothing, see nothing, taste nothing, feel nothing, smell nothing. He was in a void. Other planes of existence, if they existed, were—

It happened!

HE HAD BEEN conscious of a sensation akin to the tightening of a bowstring before the arrow lets fly. He felt as though he was being shattered against a concrete wall. Then all was madness.

A dynamo thrown out of balance threatens to burst itself asunder. A roller coaster leaves the track as it starts down. The nine-thousand-volt shock of

the electric chair is like a physical blow. A glass thrown against the floor shivers itself into a thousand fragments. Starshells, bombshells, skyrockets! Grenades, lightning and artillery! Comets, suns and careening planets!

With a high, thin wail Stevie's hurtling self fell endlessly, turning over and over, dropping millions of miles a minute while the nausea of terror drew his stomach muscles taut as a drumhead. And all the while ten thousand projectors threw ten thousand different pictures upon the same screen. Past towers, seas, valleys and snow-capped peaks! Past streaking meteors, blinding searchlights, exploding bombs! Whole galaxies burst before his very eyes. And he fell, fell, fell into a bottomless pit which yawned like a well with a trillion levels. He fell, fell, fell, and all the while, as the tide ebbs from the shore, consciousness was gradually slipping from him. He screamed against the churning din and felt his thin voice taper away into nothingness. As the man in agony sinks into the relief of velvet death, Stevie slipped prone to the black couch of oblivion with a shuddering, moaning sigh.

III.

IT REQUIRED many hours for Stevie to fight his way, inch by inch, up through the muck of nothingness; and like any man who finishes a battle of which he is proud, Stevie was ready for a little praise.

He opened his eyes to find himself in yet another room of the suite. Bed, table and walls were white and the odor of iodoform was heavy. Through the door, as he cautiously moved his aching being, was the electric chair. Quickly, he looked away.

Something clattered in the outer room and Stevie hopefully made a throat-clearing noise. Presently Boris lumbered through the door, to look in with those vacant, staring, soulless eyes. He grunted and moved away.

Stevie felt annoyed.

A mutter of voices sounded for a moment and then Bolton glanced in. He didn't smile or nod. He went away.

Stevie was more annoyed than before. Here he had gone and practically died for the cause and all he got was a grunt and a glance. With some bitterness he told himself that this must be the way all guinea pigs got treated and, therefore, he amounted to less than a rodent.

Presently Boris came in and, without ceremony, pushed an icy cloth into Steve's hot face. The shock almost made him cry out. Indignantly he squirmed to keep water from running over his neck. Bolton came in, his eyes gleaming with a hard, fanatical light.

"What happened?"

Stevie thought the man might have asked about his condition.

"Come, come!" snapped Bolton. "What happened?"

Stevie glowered to the best of his ability. He had gone through so much that anything which happened now must be pallid indeed.

Bolton made an impatient movement to Boris. Boris grabbed Stevie and made him sit up by almost crushing his arm.

Stevie surrendered. "It was awful. Don't make me talk about it!"

Bolton gave another signal. Boris tightened his grip, and Stevie yelled in pain.

"Talk!" said Bolton. "Tell me everything!"

"I . . . I c-can't describe it," begged Stevie. "I . . . I fell through a million miles and the Universe exploded and—"

"Did you *see* anything?"

"M-maybe mountains and seas and . . . and . . . it was . . . like a well with terraces in it. That was it! A well! With row below row of terraces!"

"With *people?*"

"No. Just comets and terraces and mountains and things."

Bolton decided he had it all. "I was afraid of that," he snapped in impatience. "You went the entire gamut of the planes. But you confirm what I believe. You came back, and sane. That's better! That's better! Now we're *getting places!* Mountains, seas, comets—you are *sure* you saw no people?"

"Yes."

"That is bad. But perhaps you were too far away. Perhaps . . . perhaps we need direction. Something to sight the target, indicate the goal. Yes. I must work on it." He stalked to the door, and there he paused, suddenly shaking his fist at an imaginary foe. "I shall succeed! The next time will bring victory!"

"The next time?" wailed Stevie.

But Bolton took it so much for granted he didn't even hear. He vanished and Boris shoved some soup at Stevie.

"Drink it," growled Boris. "Get strong. Tomorrow, next day, maybe go some more."

Stevie fended off the soup and slumped into a shuddering heap in a tangle of covers.

"Again," he whimpered. "I can't! I tell you, I can't! Not . . . not through *that!*"

White walls, white bed and iodoform. But, for the next twenty-four hours, all Stevie had to do was lid his eyes and the Universe went mad. All that night he battled through flashing fleets of fireballs which defied the rules of the road. He wanted badly to beg for a light, but treatment and attitude sealed his lips. He fought it out, feeling more alone than he ever had before in his life! If only he had the courage of James Fitz-James, the ferocity of Roderick Dhu, the calm of Galahad! But he didn't, and he was acutely aware of being Stevie Jebson, five foot five and less than a hundred and ten pounds.

He thanked the sun when it appeared to shine through the double plate windows and leave a warm yellow square on the wall above the bed. It made him drowsy, and soon, exhausted, he slumbered in peace.

SUDDENLY the world exploded—but it was only Boris picking up and dropping the top of the bed to wake him. Resentfully Stevie sat up and then, with a twinge of fear, knew that he was a prisoner and that it was late afternoon and that—

"No!" shouted Stevie.

"You get up," grunted Boris. "Doctor ready."

Stevie sat his ground, but Boris effortlessly pulled him erect and shoved a hospital bathrobe at him. Giving up, Stevie put it on. He was aware of being hungry.

"Can I get something to eat?"

Boris had it there, a cup of thin gruel.

"Just this?" said Stevie.

"Doctor say more make you sick when nerves get blocked."

Stevie lost his appetite, putting the gruel down on the table. He felt disorganized. For two days he hadn't washed his teeth, or had a bath—shaving had never bothered him much. He sat still, bemoaning the ill fate and hunger which had driven him to accept that first breakfast. And here he was, on the verge of— He shuddered. Alone he would voyage again into the emptiness between the worlds.

Bolton came in, pale and austere, indifferent to anything but his problem.

"Ah!" he said shortly. "He's all right."

"If I could have a toothbrush—" ventured Stevie.

"It is regrettable," said Bolton, "that I am still at an impasse. Regrettable!"

Steve's heart began to beat. "You mean . . . you mean I don't have to—"

"All for the lack of directional aids!" cursed Bolton. "A form of chart and it's done! Have you no idea of the

course you took? But, of course, you wouldn't have brains enough to think of that! If I could only get a man of courage, whose fearlessness equaled my own—"

Stevie was resentful. "You try."

Bolton made an impatient motion with his hands. "And risk all my findings? Risk going mad, perhaps, never again to— Bah!"

He forgot his guinea pig and stalked about the room, glowering into space, sometimes pounding fist into palm to vent his exasperation.

After a while Stevie said, "May I get dressed?"

Bolton gave him no heed so Stevie got up and located his clothing in a closet. Dreading the possibility of Bolton getting a new idea, he climbed into his underclothes, and then his shirt and pants, one eye still on Bolton. If the fellow would only have a stroke or fall out the window, or if the police should hear about it or maybe the building catch fire— A loud thump brought Stevie out of it. The one book he had salvaged from the house—the small edition of the "Arabian Nights"—had flipped from coat to floor. Bolton gave an annoyed glance to the sound and, hastily, Stevie bent to retrieve his pet. Suddenly it was wrenched from his hands and Stevie recoiled from the lightning in Bolton's eyes.

"A book!" cried Bolton.

"The . . . the 'Arabian Nights,'" gulped Stevie. "I . . . I—"

"That's it!" cried Bolton. "Fantasy!"

"History," mumbled Stevie, trying to get it back.

"Fantasy!" yelled Bolton. "Authors are in a hypnotic state when they create. All the brain is accounted for by modern psychology *except* the creative imagination! And from whence do those lightning flashes of inspiration come? Crystal gazing—fiction writing—all truly creative work in the realm of fantasy *must* have some source. And where is that source?" he shouted at Stevie.

"The . . . the 'Arabian Nights,'" stammered Stevie, "isn't exactly fantasy. S-some of the stories are historical—"

"Bah! I know the work. Most of it is purest imagination. Jinn, incredible cities, lovely women! I say *fantasy!"* In agitation he took a turn around the room and then leveled his finger at Stevie. "There is my chart! There is where you are going! To a land which exists beyond your sight. You will step through the pages of this book; into the company of its characters! The world is your idea. This, when you are detached from this world, becomes all there is. You saw a million levels, but now you shall see only one! Get ready!"

Stevie's jaw was unhinged. "You think I could go . . . go into that story? You mean me? All of me? Into . . . ulp . . . w-wh-where?"

"Boris! Bring him in!"

"B-bu-but I don't *want* to go into . . . glub!"

Boris had him in tow, hand over mouth, the other at the pants seat. Ahead loomed the gruesome chair.

"The world is your idea!" chanted Bolton. "If an idea becomes the whole horizon, then it becomes your world. Strap him down, get the needles! This time you are on your way!"

"B-bu-but I don'—"

"Shut up! You're going into a story whether you like it or not!"

"I do like it, but I don't like going into it!" wailed Stevie. "Ouch!" he cried as the needle bit.

Bolton was working like mad. He shoved the *chilion* so hard it almost broke Stevie's nose.

"Plugs!" cried Bolton.

Stevie felt as though he would lose his ears.

With a crash, Bolton swept trays and instruments from a table and thrust it, tipped, across Stevie. On it he battened down a middle page of the book

so that the guinea pig could read it as the lights faded out.

"What if I never get back?" cried Stevie.

Bolton eased a plug. "That's the chance I'm taking!"

"You're taking?" wailed Stevie.

WITH A SHUDDER Stevie saw that the page was part of that imaginative tale, "The City of Brass." He knew it well—all too well—and more than once he had wondered if such a city had ever existed or did exist. The story was hardly a story at all, being only an account of an expedition sent out by a king, and the discovery of a city, entirely of brass, heaped with wealth—but where all the inhabitants lay strewn about in attitudes of death.

His glance fell upon one particular passage, a legend found upon a tablet of gold, left upright—near the couch of a wondrously clad, but apparently dead maiden—in the hands of two dead slaves, that the visitor might read some lesson from the fate which had befallen this town.

"In the name of Allah," read the tablet, "the Compassionate, the Merciful, ordainer of fate and destiny. O son of Adam, how ignorant art thou in the long indulgence of hope! And how unmindful art thou of the arrival of the predestined period!"

"Not I!" shivered Stevie. But he could not keep from reading on.

"Knowest thou not that death hath called for thee, and hath advanced to seize thy soul? Be ready then for departure, and make provision in the world, for thou wilt quit it soon."

"No!" pleaded Stevie. He did not notice that the doctor and Boris were gone, that the lights were slowly, slowly dimming down toward blackness, that he was again floating in the air.

"Where is Adam, father of Mankind? Where is Noah and his offspring? Where are the kings of the regions of the earth? The mansions are void of their presence. Where are the foreigners? They have all died. Oh, thou, though thou knew me not, I will acquaint thee with my name and descent. I am Tedmur, the daughter of the King of the Amelekites, of those who ruled the country with equity. I possessed what none of the kings possessed and ruled with justice, and acted impartially toward my subjects. I gave and bestowed, and I lived a long time in the enjoyment of happiness and an easy life, possessing emancipated male and female slaves. This I did until the summoner of death came to my abode, and disasters occurred before me—"

"Doctor!" cried Stevie, as he saw the light was fading. "Doctor! Please! Not this! Oh, God, save me! Not into a city of dead men, not into an enchanted land of Ifrits and jinn! Doctor!"

He sought to struggle but already the numbness had him. He felt not anything. He neither smelled nor heard. And his last sense, his precious sight, was becoming useless as the light died down.

The savage grips of terror had closed upon him. Only the pages of this book were left and upon them he fixed his saucer eyes to read:

"Child of Adam, let not hope make game of thee. From all that thy hands have treasured thou wilt be removed—"

Stevie's throat tightened, and a groan dribbled from his lips. He could barely see the last of the words quoted him from the tablet beside the dead maiden.

"Whosoever arriveth at our city, and entereth it, God facilitating his entrance into it, let him take of the wealth what he can, but not touch anything that is on my body, for it is the covering of my person, and the attire with which I am fitted to go forth from the world. Therefore, let him fear God, and not seize aught of it, *for he would destroy himself!* I have caused this to be—"

But the light was gone, and all was

dark and somewhere afar there came a spinning sound as though a siren started its rise into its piercing shriek. Din burst upon Stevie. A giant red wheel spun, crashing its gears. The vortex of a scarlet maelstrom yawned wide, comets flashed, cannon thunder and gale sent him crashing endlessly down, down, down!

He wailed against it, but his frail voice was lost. He strove to pray, but screaming wind jerked the words from his blue lips. His stomach tightened. He was tumbling end over end, forever and forever and—

There was only a gentle moan of wind, and sand was cool against his face. He lay very still, gripping the solidity under him with anxious fingers. Slowly the whole mad scheme came back to him and with a sharp intake of breath he cried out within himself. He dared no real sound against those stern and silent towers before him—towers of brass!

IV.

"THIS is no more than a nightmare," Stevie told himself, sitting up and shakily rubbing his eyes. "I am actually sitting in a chair and all this is dream stuff. Right now I am deluded into thinking that I am looking at a city while, in reality, I am examining the page of a book. None of this," he said with determination, "has any reality whatever."

So saying he got to his feet, but for all his brave words he discovered that his knees wabbled so badly that he could hardly stand.

"The leader of the Caliph's expedition," he said, "built a means of climbing over the wall." The sound of his voice startled him. Only the wind was there to answer, and the wind was cold. Hesitantly he began to approach the city, marveling at its hurtful brightness under the dawn sun. It must be of brass, he decided—walls, gates, towers. Brass.

He walked forward toward the near wall, and, as he came close, he saw what he had expected to find, a great ladder leading up to the battlements as built by the visiting Emir Moosha. Stevie felt very small as he stood at its base. He tested it with a tentative hand but could find no quiver in it. He put a foot upon the lower rung and then recoiled. Through his memory shot the passage which had to do with the fate of the Memlook who had first ascended that tower to gaze upon the city beyond. The dazzling sigh had caused him to go mad and leap from the battlements down to his destruction. Stevie backed up.

The expedition had found some keys on the inside of the gate after one that managed to enter. Who knew but what the main gates were still open?

"But it's all just a nightmare," said Stevie, shivering in the cold wind, his ears hurt by the awful silence of the place. He trudged through the loose sand until he came to the gates.

They were terrifyingly tall, and, following them up, Stevie almost sat down before he found the top. He approached, wondering somewhat at his insistence on getting into the place. "It's just a nightmare, of course." It strengthened him.

But the gate was locked, and he stood back, staring up, half expecting to be challenged from the watchtowers above it. He knew that nobody would, of course. The place was filled only with the dead. A chill went down his spine.

He walked hesitantly back to the gigantic ladder and again fixed a foot on the bottom step. "If it's just a dream," he told himself, "then certainly there is no danger of my hurting myself." He managed a shaky laugh and started up.

He climbed determinedly, glance fixed on the top. But he tired soon and paused to rest. All was well until he looked

down and then, when he saw how far away the ground had fallen, he seized hurriedly to the rail and clung on hard, feeling faint. After a long time he decided that he could not forever remain halfway up and halfway down. Going up seemed the lesser of two evils because then he did not have to look down. He went up.

He took good care not to inspect the earth below when he clung to the next to the last rung. And he took equal care not to let the full impact of the spread city strike him all at once. Fending off that destructive sight with his upraised arm, he mounted the wall. Footing was bad and he laid hold of an embrasure edge to steady himself and, at that moment, saw the brilliant panorama of the town, scintillant below, all yellow and scarlet. He was so stunned that he stood for almost a minute without gripping anything at all. Thoughtlessly he started to walk straight ahead. His right foot was out over nothing and the pavement was a hundred feet below. He strove to recover. He whirled and shot into space. Wild hands clasped the rungs of the steps which led down.

HE HUNG ON in panting terror. Directly under him he could see the body of the Memlook who had fallen from that position. The sight of it gave him strength enough to haul himself back. Like a crab he scuttled backward down the battlement steps and finally reached the pavement. For an instant he was a little proud of himself for having accomplished it and then came the thought: "Oh, well, it's only a nightmare, after all. None of this is real." So saying he tripped over the Memlook's sword and fell flat on his face. It hurt. He sat up and found that the sharp edge had nicked his shin. It bled. He nursed it.

"That could happen in a dream, too!" he said fiercely.

But the Memlook was no dream. His face was smashed in flat.

"That happened hundreds of years ago," said Stevie. "Of course this is just a dream. Why, he'd be decomposed by now!" But he avoided the corpse so thoroughly that his face was still turned toward it fifty feet away. His heels caught in something and he sat down hard only to leap up as though stung. He had sat down on another corpse!

The man was evidently a guard. No rust was on his armor, no mold upon his clothes. His face was faintly flushed and his open eyes were far from glassy.

"It's a trick," said Stevie. "It's a trick of a dream." He took out his watch, after the fashion of Sherlock Holmes, and held the metal back close to the guard's lips.

Stevie almost died.

There was a slight fog on that metal!

Hastily he scrambled up and sped on his way. He hardly knew when he entered the thoroughfare which started with the gate and ended with a great palace, but when he did he saw that he was flanked by the tall yellow towers which sparkled in the sun. They went dizzily up into the acutely blue sky, and high, high up Stevie saw the body of a man draped over the edge of a small balcony. He looked quickly down and saw with a start that the entrance to the tower was almost choked with bodies. He could see a section of winding stairs inside the door, and that, too, was carpeted with burnoosed "corpses."

Stevie hastened on. But every time he saw a body and looked swiftly away it was only to encounter two more. Men were everywhere sprawled in the attitudes of death. Here and there they were more thickly piled, especially in the street of foodstuffs. Eyes, eyes, eyes, all staring at Stevie with never a wink. He increased his pace until he was almost running. Why had he come into this accursed place? Dream or no dream, it was the stuff of which madness was made.

"And it is a dream!" cried Stevie to himself, pushing against the solid pave with a testing foot. "In a moment it will all dissolve! A dream and only a dream! These buildings, those towers, that palace—yes, and all these people—they don't exist! "You hear that?" he shouted at them. "You don't exist!"

The ghostly echoes rolled up his voice and bore it back to him. He shuddered and wondered at the courage which had let him utter those sounds. The hundreds and hundreds of bodies, everywhere, looked intently and unseeingly at him. Some were holding cloth in their hands. Here a man had been buying shoes. There a soldier was propped against his crumpled horse. Here a woman, surrounded by servants, lay in the center of the market, her veil askew, the donkey she had ridden lying with head pillowed against her hip. Merchants, doctors, peddlers, police. And yes, there was a thief with the wallet of a man but half withdrawn from the victim's pocket. Stevie stopped before he realized what he was doing and pushed the wallet back into the victim's pocket

and shoved the thief's hand away. Contact with that cool flesh brought him up with a start.

"They're dead," he gagged. "But . . . but they're looking at me. They're dead but they aren't dead—" And suddenly he was running as fast as he could go, running blindly with terror.

HE DID NOT see where he was going. His speeding feet raced up a long flight of steps. Guards in shining brass helmets were crumpled upon their spears and Stevie leaped the barrier. He could not check himself. He had entered the palace and, just before him, too near for him to avoid it, spread a large lake!

He caught his breath and dived.

The shock hurt. He sat up rubbing his bruised face. The floor was so perfectly fashioned from glass that it was a perfect mirror, throwing his scared white face back up to him from between his legs. His own image steadied him. He laughed and felt foolish. Swallowing his heart, he got to his knees. Over at the side he saw a chamberlain in brocaded robes, head pillowed upon his arm as though he slept, a big silver ewer forgotten beside him.

Stevie began to orient himself. He realized that this palace must have several entrances, because, according to the Emir Moosha's report, there were treasure rooms before one got here to the glass floor. Yes, he recalled all of it now. And, recalling it, he wondered that he should have to recall anything. If this were a dream, it would all be plain to him—

"But it is a dream, of course," said Stevie.

He still wouldn't trust this floor, and so, on hands and knees, advanced to the next door. In this room he saw weapons of war, helmets, shields, spears and bows all strewn about in disarray.

"He might have cleaned up the mess he made," complained Stevie of the Emir Moosha. He went to another door and saw that the room was filled with figures of birds in red gold and white silver. He knew he was looking for something but wouldn't quite admit what it was. He moved on to find another room where great silver chests were standing open, emitting a glare of light which exuded from their precious stones.

"Moosha couldn't carry much of it," said Stevie, somehow thankful about it. He picked up three diamonds the size of his thumbnail and put them into his pocket. His hand contacted a pocketknife, and he was somewhat amazed to find that he seemed to retain all the things which had been in his pockets the day he had left his aunt's house. He checked over their contents and found a handkerchief, toothbrush, a razor, a box of matches, and a fountain pen he had always favored, as well as his watch. Funny that these things should stay with him.

He went on, glancing into other rooms. Here and there were tablets upon the wall, and he was somewhat astonished to find that he could read them. Never before had he suspected himself of having a knowledge of Arabic. But no, these things were in English or, perhaps, he merely thought they were in English. It puzzled him.

BEFORE he could realize where he had gone, he stood in the room of the Queen Tedmur.

He caught his breath sharply.

A shaft of sunlight fell upon her exquisite face. Her mouth was open in a faint smile and she seemed to be regarding him with welcome. Stevie smiled back and almost spoke. Hurriedly he recalled that she was dead and backed a step. But he could not take his eyes from her. Indeed, she seemed to be smiling at him and again he almost smiled back. No one else in the city had had an expression of welcome.

The girl herself was enough to hold the interest of any man. Stevie was

not schooled enough in such matters to take more than the general effect into account, but he knew now that only one description, in the "Tale of the Porter and the Young Girls," could come close to fitting her.

"She was a child, having a slim and gracious body, the very model of what a young girl should be, not only for her exquisite face, not only for her beauty and her air of breeding, but also for the perfection of her waist and carriage. Her brow was as white as the first ray fallen from the new moon, her eyes were the eyes of a gazelle, and her brows above them were as the crescent moons of Ramadan. Her cheeks were anemones, her mouth the scarlet seal of Sulayman, her face pale as the full moon when she first rises above the grasses. As for her young, pliant body, it lay beneath her robe like some precious love letter in a silken case."

Stevie felt drunk. He took several involuntary steps forward toward the resplendent couch. Her gown was woven of pearls. Her head was covered with a crown of red gold which contained two jewels like suns. And she was smiling a welcome at him, telling him he had nothing to fear, that she had been waiting all these centuries—

He tripped and dropped to hands and knees. Under him was a body and he swiftly drew back from it. The thing was without its head and that same head lay grinning half across the room in a pool of dried blood. No question about this man being dead.

Stevie got his wits together. This was Talib, son of Sahl, who had coveted this queen's raiment and who, against the emir's orders, had approached between the two slaves who had risen up to strike him dead.

Stevie gave a quick glance at the slaves that supported the gold tablet. One was white and the other black and they held great swords which shone like mirrors except for a patch in the middle of each which was black. They showed no sign of moving.

The tablet's writing took Stevie's attention for an instant. Yes, that was the way it read: "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. O son of Adam, how ignorant art thou in the long indulgence of hope. Knowest thou not that death hath called for thee and hath advanced to seize thy soul—"

Stevie recoiled. He looked at the slaves again.

At the bottom of the tablet it said that he courted death who dared approach this queen or touch her. And these dead men had risen up to strike Talib dead—

Stevie gave a last, despairing look at the queen. She was beautiful until it was hard for him to breathe. A wave of pity swept through him that she should be dead.

Or was she dead?

Like that guard, could he detect breath on her lips?

He decided not to try when he glanced again at Talib. Mournfully, he went out of the door and was sunk so deep in the strangeness of what he had seen that he was almost tricked again into thinking the glass floor a lake.

He wandered then through the town, sprawled bodies everywhere about him, feeling dismal and alone and hearing only the wind as it moaned past the towers. It had grown warmer now that the sun was well up and he was thirsty. Diffidently he stepped over the bodies about a fountain and washed his face and hands in the cool water. A great oppression was upon him.

He roamed the streets again. There were dates in a fruit seller's stall, and he ate some of them, surprised that they were still good. He went on, realizing suddenly that he was tired and looking for a place to sleep where there were no bodies. At last he found a secluded spot on a roof and lay himself down.

"When I wake up," he told himself, "I shall be again in my own world. This is just a dream and I shall wake up with it over." He nodded his head. Yes, that is what he would do.

He slept.

IT WAS LATE when he woke and he was stiff. The afternoon sun gleamed on the other faces of the tall towers. Beyond that, nothing had changed. He was disappointed, but then, of course, one could dream that one had slept. Yes, that was it. Meantime, he would find himself some more dates and water.

That night was one of terror for Stevie. The wind strengthened and whined through the town until he thought he could hear the dead talking. The hours dragged endlessly, and then, again, it was morning. Stevie was puzzled. His watch was keeping time, telling him that it, at least, was in its right senses.

He wandered back to the palace and again stood in the doorway of the queen's room, staring at her. A sense of weariness descended upon him. She was so beautiful, far more lovely than any picture or person he had ever seen. And she still seemed to smile a welcome at him. The slaves still crouched beside her bed, eyes vacant, limbs stony, swords in hand.

Stevie went back into the town. A sense of terror began to grip him as he realized that he might never get out of this place. He had no reason to believe he would again wake up—if, indeed, he was actually asleep. He might roam forever through these dead-burdened streets, never again to hear a human voice.

The thought made him think hard. Maybe he could walk out of here. Maybe there was another city somewhere at hand. Maybe, if he climbed one of those towers, he could see afar and locate a place to go where there were people, live people.

He went to the foot of the tower on the right of the gate as he had entered. He was getting used to bodies by now, though he wondered a little to find so many in one place—just as though they had all tried to swarm up these stairs an instant before death overtook them. Stevie made his way over the tangle. The stairs were also jammed, but he picked his way and began to mount. The curving, brass steps wound endlessly upward. When he came to small arrow slots he could see the country spreading farther and farther beyond the walls. Perhaps at the top he would find what he was searching for.

Up, up, up until his legs began to ache. Was the tower without a top? But it had one. A large platform like the floor of a cupola accommodated the watch. And the watch, in the form of one trooper draped over the edge of a balcony, was still on duty though his eyes stared sightlessly inward at the side of the tower and his arms swung slowly back and forth in the wind.

Stevie inspected the place. There was a great gong of brass hanging in the center. The wooden clapper was tight against it and there seemed no way to operate it.

Stevie looked at the country around and about the city. To the north was a sea, achingly blue. To the south lay a desert which undulated in dunes to the far horizon. Close under the walls were the untilled fields.

Weariness, both from climb and disappointment, took hold of him. He looked about for a place to sit down but there was only the rail and a long wooden bar. Stevie sat down on the bar. He mourned any possibility of ever returning to his own land. It seemed to him that he had left it years ago and that he would be imprisoned with the dead forever in this timeless tomb. When he was rested he got up. His eye caught a movement on his right,

and he dodged so that he almost fell into the railing.

The clapper of the gong was descending! The great hammer fell in a second, but to Stevie, expecting the awful impact of sound impossible to bear in this dead place, it fell an hour. He had seated himself on the lever which operated it, he knew, and was now powerless to stop it.

The great gong thundered its deafening peal, swaying and waving under the impact and sending out its long undulating note. Stevie put his hand against it but it was too big to stop. He felt as though it would go on quivering forever and that some terrible happening would immediately follow upon the heels of that note.

SMOKE was in his nostrils, dark and acrid.

Smoke was curling up from the solid floor!

Smoke swelled in an ebony column all around him and then grew as solid as teak.

Stevie was staring at a big steel buckle as large as his head. He roved his eyes left and right to behold a belt. He looked down and saw two great, bent knees. He looked up and saw shoulders wedged tight against the top of the cupola.

And a head!

The mouth was hell fire. The horns were spiked. The eyes were as big as bucket tops and red as flame. The awful odor of this thing struck Stevie like a blow.

He knew what it was. He was in a land of madness. And this was—he shuddered until his teeth rattled—this thing was a jinni!

The hands, the size of doors, hung loosely as though resting themselves an instant before they grabbed.

A voice which made the gong seem but a murmur, smote Stevie: "He who would strike the gong knows that he must die!"

Stevie could not utter a sound.

"Whence came you to this place?" cried the Ifrit. "O whelp Shaitan, thou knowest what is to befall he who would inject himself in affairs which concern him not. Hast thou anything to say before I send thee down into dust?"

Stevie still couldn't talk. A great hand engulfed him and swung him out toward the rail, toward a drop of five hundred feet to brass pavement!

"Wait!" screamed Stevie, over space. "It was an accident! I sat on the lever! I did not mean to strike the gong!"

"Thou liest!"

Stevie could look straight down five hundred feet through the empty air. Desperately he clung to the Ifrit's fingers. He felt a wave of nausea sweep over him at his powerlessness. He could not keep from staring at the earth so far below, and then he saw something which, for an instant, took his mind from his plight.

Down there, the men about the base of the tower were getting sluggishly to their feet!

"I long knew this evil day was coming," cried the Ifrit, "but I also knew that I would give myself free hand in vengeance. He who enters this enchanted city enters only to die. He who strikes the gong is already dead. You have undone my work, robbed me of my power and so—you die!"

He unloosened his hand. Stevie held hard to the thumb.

"Don't drop me! Don't drop me!" he wailed.

The Ifrit blew a hurricane of breath at him so that he swayed like a leaf.

"Don't!" cried Stevie. "I . . . I'll do anything you—"

Angrily the Ifrit sought to shake him off and then brought out the other hand to pry him loose.

Stevie gave one last cry and consigned himself to eternity. By this time

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he had expected to be halfway to the earth. But the other hand had not touched him, nor had the Ifrit blown at him again. Stevie opened his eyes. The Ifrit's stare was one of spellbound wonder. Stevie glanced at himself and then shivered.

He had no legs!

Still the Ifrit moved not.

Stevie realized that he had no arms!

And yet nothing happened.

Stevie's body had vanished and all that remained was the pallor of his face.

That, too, drifted away like ebbing smoke—and the hand of the Ifrit was empty!

V.

HE STARTED up from the hospital bed, still apprehensive of being dropped. But with thankfulness he saw that the floor was only a couple of feet down. A wave of dizziness went through him and he was glad to lie back. He had never felt so weak before in all his life; the whole room was going around and around until he wanted to reach out and stop it.

The feeble movement he did make was barely enough to make the springs squeak.

Bolton came to the door, grunting to see that Stevie was awake. "Huh, you're alive!" He crossed the room and grabbed a chair, seating himself. "Well, come on. What happened?"

Resentfully, Stevie said: "You . . . you sent me itno a town where everybody was dead. It . . . it was awful! I don't want to talk about it."

"So!" said Bolton. "You got to the City of Brass! Did you have any difficulty coming to rest there? I looked the thing over after you left—"

"After I left?" gaped Stevie. "Wasn't . . . wasn't I in that chair all of the time?"

"After three days we went in."

"And I was gone?"

"Yes, gone. I took the book and looked it over and I saw where there were jewels and gold strewn about. Is that true?"

Stevie didn't want to answer for reasons he could not himself define. Perhaps he was thinking of Tedmur and the possibility that those slaves would not act again as they had on Talib.

"Well?" said Bolton shortly.

Stevie continued his silence.

Bolton reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the three huge diamonds. "What about these?"

"I got them there," said Stevie defensively. "There's a tablet that says anyone is welcome to take what he can carry and . . . and those diamonds belong to me!"

"They'll give me working funds!" snapped Bolton in dispute. He put them back into his pocket. "Why did you stay a whole week?"

"A week?" gaped Stevie.

"That's right. A week."

"But I was only there, actually, two days and a night. How could I be there for that time and be away from here a week?"

"Interesting," said Bolton. "Let me see. Three days and we looked at the chair. Four more days— Yes, you were gone a week. But, of course, we couldn't expect the sun to follow the same period on that plane."

"It's no different plane. Emir Moosha got there from an ancient city—"

"Ah, but did he?" said Bolton. "Or is this straight creative work? Well! You did get there, then, without harm. You vanished from the chair and returned to the chair last night. You must have eaten while you were gone."

"Some dates," said Stevie.

"Ah, yes. Some dates. There were several in your coat. Did you . . . ah . . . see anything of this Queen Tedmur?"

Stevie kept still.

"You are being very stubborn," said Bolton.

"Boris!"

"She's dead. There isn't anything left of her," hastened Stevie.

"That's better. But there are jewels and gold lying about?"

"Yes," said Stevie faintly.

"Then you can be careful to load yourself down with more of them the next time."

"The next time!" cried Stevie, sitting straight up in bed, eyes like saucers. "But I can't go! I can't! There's an Ifrit!"

"A what?"

"A jinni! He's as big as a house—" He stopped. It sounded so incredible. But now that he knew it was no dream, now that he saw the diamonds— He swallowed hard. "I can't go."

"I'm afraid you'll have to risk it," said Bolton. "I need much more preparation before I dare risk myself on such a venture."

"Wait," said Stevie. "I was only gone a few hours the first time. Then I was gone a week. Maybe next time I won't get back for years—maybe never! That's a city of the dead and the Ifrit—"

But Bolton was not listening. "Gold and jewels," he mused. "You had better content yourself with jewels. You can carry more of them. Well! Go back to sleep. Boris will bring you some food after a while. We've lost time, much time. You'll be fit again tomorrow."

"But the Ifrit!" cried Stevie.

"You'll have to risk it," repeated Bolton heartlessly.

"I won't go!" yelled Stevie.

Bolton's hands crashed into his mouth, flinging him back to the pillow. "You'll go and like it, and the next time you get the idea you can talk to me in that tone, think of your well-being first!" He stalked from the room and Stevie glowered at the empty door. He realized abruptly that he hated the man, hated his selfish cowardice, his avarice, his heartlessness. Oh, what he'd give to see Bolton in the hands of that Ifrit!

He lay back and gloated over the picture, the salty taste of his cut lips sickish sweet in his mouth.

WHEN NEXT he was hied to the chair, Stevie was only a shadow of his old self. He had been thin enough before, but now he looked as though the slightest wind would blow him away. When he fought Boris he might as well have kicked the side of a building for all the good it did him.

"Don't forget," said Bolton greedily, "that when you come back, you're to have your pockets full. Only the biggest stones, understand?"

Stevie kept still.

"If you don't—" said Bolton, leaving it hang like a thundercloud in the room.

"I may never come back," said Stevie. "I tell you an Ifrit—"

"I'll take care of him," said Bolton while Boris strapped the guinea pig down.

"You'll what?"

Seeing that Stevie's hands were now held to the arms of the chair, Bolton took a revolver from his jacket and put it in Stevie's pocket. The cold contact of the steel made Stevie start.

"I . . . I've never fired one! Please, it might go off and shoot me! I'd never use it on that Ifrit. It . . . it would be like using a bean shooter on an elephant!"

"I want more diamonds," said Bolton. "And when you get them I will have accomplished my purposes without any risk to myself. Make certain that you succeed. You're a fool for not having brought more the first time."

Stevie glowered to the best of his ability. He knew now that this Bolton was far from courageous, that he was nothing more than an egotistic bully.

But Stevie was weary and he made no further argument. He felt like a splinter in a hurricane. It was too late

for him to help himself. That fatal morning, when he had let hunger get him into this, could never be recalled, and now he knew that things would never again be the same.

Bolton swiftly applied the needle, the *chiliou,* and the ear plugs and then lowered the copper cap. He pushed forward the tray which bore the open book and bent the light upon the page. Suddenly Stevie decided that he would win for a change. He would not look at the open book. He would stare straight ahead into the dark with his eyes wide open and tell himself over and over that he was here in a room. That way he would keep contact.

The doctor signaled to Boris and they withdrew. Stevie looked straight ahead of him. The light gradually began to dim. He felt like smiling. He would not look at that page, and after a while they would come in to see if he was, gone and there he'd be, laughing at them.

But Stevie had not allowed for the fact that the human eye is consructed to focus upon the brightest object within the range of vision. It began to be an effort to keep his glance away from the whiteness of that page. Then he felt as though weights were hung on his lids to bring his eyes down. The light was fading rapidly. He could win, if he could hold out another instant.

But he didn't. He dropped his glance and his traitorous mind scooped up: "Be rejoiced O emir; for this is the City of Brass and this is the appearance of it that I find in the Book of Hidden Treasures—"

It was dark. The great wheel was spinning. The far-off siren swooped near with its piercing scream. Worlds, comets, flames and thunder! Stevie felt the sick terror rip at him and prepared to fall and fall and fall—

But he didn't.

Before he thought he was well started, something solid was against his back. Slowly he opened his eyes.

VI.

HE WAS NOT very surprised to find that he had returned to the plains outside the City of Brass. What concerned him more was the change which had taken place in himself. He had always thought of his body as being scrawny. But it wasn't now. He had, but a few seeming minutes before, been too weak to lift his hand. But now he was strong. It came over him that these journeys were changing him. Less and less of him had come back to the land of his birth. And now—now would there be enough attraction in that land ever to pull him home again?

Would he ever again vanish as he had when in the hand of the Ifrit? Or was it more likely that, now he had captured the strength which should long ago have been his, that he could never quit this plane?

Mournfully he stared at the great bright towers in the distance. He had arrived quite some way from them this time and his surroundings— He stared about him and hastily scrambled to his feet. He was in a cemetery! Ruined tombs and stones were everywhere about him and grass waved gently among them. Was it not enough, he told himself, to have the whole city dead?

Again he looked at the brass towers. Something seemed to have changed about the outer walls and plains before them, and, at first, he could not identify the difference. And then it came to him that tall grass now grew where only sand had been before. And not only tall grass but tilled fields of wheat! But —but that wasn't possible! He had quitted the place only a day and a night before and certainly wheat took months to plant and cultivate. But what a change it had made! The whole lifeless aspect had become one of gentle motion. Wind over that wheat made it undulate in waves. Certainly, he told himself, wheat could not grow untended!

He came abruptly to his feet to shade his eyes against the warm and pleasant afternoon sun. Yes, he was right. There were men with crooked sticks for plows working in that far field! And there at the right were several workmen walking along the road!

Stevie couldn't believe it. Where had these people come from so swiftly? Where had this wheat gotten its start? Men on the roads, driving donkeys that drew laden carts toward the town, next took Stevie's attention. He sat down, overcome with astonishment. Was this the same place? Those two towers, those black stone walls— Yes, it must be the City of Brass!

Nearer at hand he beheld a flash of sun on metal. Under a cloud of dust were a dozen troopers, their long white capes flowing out from them, their horses proceeding with mincing steps. The brass helmets and steel swords were enough to blind a man.

Stevie decided suddenly that he had better not be seen by this patrol. There was no telling what would happen to him now. His clothing was so strange that he would certainly be picked up. He cast about him for a hiding place and found a nearby ruined house toward which he made his swift way. As he neared it he saw two jackals rush from it and slink out of sight in a ditch. Stevie peered cautiously into the dark interior, and then decided that where jackals were there could be no lions. He looked back at the rapidly approaching troopers and went inside.

HE FUMBLED his way across the floor, hoping to find a better hiding place, and his outstretched hand encountered something sticky. He withdrew it quickly and wiped it upon his trousers leg. When he moved again his foot connected with something soft and yielding. Exploring fingers found an arm. He moved his hand upward toward the head and suddenly leaped a foot backward. The thing had no head!

He heard the beat of horses' hoofs and lost no time in dodging into a corner. As soon as the patrol passed he would get out of this place with all speed. He had had sufficient corpses to last him a long, long time.

The sound died to be immediately followed by the creak of saddle leather and the jingle of chains and weapons. Stevie made himself as small as possible. How could those men have found this very place? For what were they looking?

And then he saw something outside he had not seen before. A torn veil waved forlornly in the wind like a flag of distress. The troopers bulked through the door. Stevie stilled his chattering teeth. If they found him now—

"Search the place!" bellowed the wali.

A sergeant began to poke his sword around. Presently he connected with the corpse and, with a grunt, dragged the thing out into the light. It was, Stevie saw, a young woman, headless and dreadfully torn.

"Where is the head?" said the wali.

The sergeant came back and searched for a long time, making careful examination of every square foot of floor. Then he began poking his sword into the corners. Stevie dodged the keen edge to the right. He dodged it to the left. But he made a rustling sound. The sergeant grabbed and held hard.

"I've got him!" he yelled.

Stevie was dragged out into the sunlight and thrown down before the mounted officer.

"No head?" said the wali.

"No head," said the sergeant; "just him."

"A ghoul," decided the wali. "Don't give him a chance to turn into an animal and get away. You sure there's no head?"

"Certain," said the sergeant.

"That settles it. He ate the head so he must be a ghoul. Tie him up!"

"Wait!" cried Stevie. "This is all

wrong! I didn't even know that the young woman was in there. I saw you coming and dodged inside—"

"You ran away when you saw troops," said the wali, "so you must have done something. Tie him up!"

The men fell upon Stevie and lashed him securely and, for all his protests, threw him over the horn of a saddle.

"I've done nothing!" cried Stevie. "I'm innocent!"

"The kadi will decide that," said the wali. "We've been having trouble with ghouls. If you change into anything, then I'll know that you are a ghoul for certain, so watch what you do."

Suddenly Stevie recalled the face of Tedmur. She was too beautiful and kind to allow such injustice. "Take me to your ruler and let her decide! If you do not," he cried, "the crime will be yours! Take me to your ruler!"

The wali looked uncomfortable. "Did you not kill that woman?"

"I did not!"

"Have you any evidence that you didn't?"

"Take me to your ruler!" cried Stevie. "She will receive all the evidence I have in my behalf."

The wali gave a crisp order and rode back toward the town, pulling at his silky black beard in deep thought.

"If I am innocent," called Stevie, "then you will be guilty of my murder!" He could say no more. He needed all his breath to hold his saddlebag position before the trooper.

The City of Brass drew near but Stevie could only see the mount's withers. He heard the gate guard salute the wali and watched the hoofs going over cobblestones. At long last they reached a flight of steps and Stevie was hauled from the horse.

The captain of the palace guard, a red-faced, boisterous fellow, shouted, "What strange thing have you, Asib?"

"It is probably a ghoul," said the wali, Asib. "He demands to see our ruler."

"The man is plainly mad," said the guard captain. "But if he wishes to die, who can stop him?"

THEY PUSHED Stevie through the great doors. This was another entrance

than the one he had first found, and the furnishings had all been changed in the halls. They came to the room with the floor like a lake, and Stevie saw that this was now the throne room. And he saw something else.

A hawk-faced fellow, with eyes as cruel as any falcon's, was seated upon the throne. The crown upon his head was the same one Tedmur had worn, as easily seen by the two stones which shone like twin suns over the man's dark brow. He was transacting business and Stevie had to wait his turn.

"Your majesty," said a complaining citizen, "this slave stole a chicken destined for a feast. I had no thought to bother you with such trifles, but these troopers heard the row and came upon me beating him."

The slave, a youth, regarded his master with clear, contemptuous eyes.

"Your punishment was too lenient!" said the king. "If you do not know how to handle slaves, you should be fined. Pay a hundred tallers to the treasurer and begone!"

The man was angry but he dared not show it. He gave the slave a sign to follow, but the guard captain made another sign and the slave was pulled back.

"A hundred lashes on his feet!" said the ruler. "Theft from his master!"

The boy was instantly snatched by two men and a brawny Nubian advanced with a handful of slit bamboo sticks. He took the sign from the ruler and immediately fell to work. Stevie turned his face away to avoid seeing the spurt of blood. The whip fell endlessly on the young man's bare feet and at last ceased. The slave was senseless.

"When he recovers, put him in the labor corps!" said the ruler. "What is that thing you have there, wali?"

"A ghoul, your majesty. He was skulking about a ruin—"

"Death," said the ruler. "Next case."

"He was skulking about a ruin," braved the wali, "and there was a murdered woman close by without her head."

"Death by torture," said the ruler.

Stevie cried: "Wait! You can't do this! I am no ghoul! I—"

"Death by slow torture," said the ruler, his brows dark.

The guard captain flung Stevie into the hands of two soldiers, and they dragged him away down a long hall. He was stunned by the change. Where he had expected the beautiful Tedmur to show him leniency, he had found a cruel despot wearing her crown. Twenty-four hours before, by his own reckoning, this entire city had been one of the dead! Wheat in the fields, murder on the outskirts, a tyrant on the throne—

The guards prodded him along toward the dungeons. They were two brute-faced fellows of little understanding and they treated Stevie gingerly, having heard the charge of ghoul. They knew very well the powers of a ghoul and they knew what were the practices of such. Ghouls "beat the country to lie in wait along roads, to frighten old dames, to terrify children, to howl in the wind, to whine at doors, to bark in the night, to haunt ruins, to cast spells, to grin in the shadows, to visit tombs, to sniff at the dead, to commit a thousand assaults and provoke a thousand calamities." And ghouls changed their shape and ate human heads besides. Not for a fortune would they touch him.

Stevie tried to talk to them, but, with all haste, they thrust him into a dungeon and clanged the door shut upon him. He heard them say to the prison guard: "A ghoul in No. 8. Watch yourself."

SILENCE SETTLED over the prison. Occasionally there was a shuffle of feet and the guard would glance into Stevie's cell to make certain he was still there. Occasionally, too, a muffled sobbing sounded nearby. Stevie, at last, began to rove the dungeon. He was

astonished to find that they had locked him in with the slave they had beaten. If they really thought him a ghoul, how little they cared what happened to this poor youth! The boy's condition was, at the moment, so much worse than Stevie's that Stevie's sympathy was instantly extended and he forgot all about himself. There was water running in a trough and Stevie took off his shirt to tear a strip from it. Using this as a sponge he began to wipe the blood away from the wounds on the boy's legs. At first the slave drew swiftly away from him, but, when he saw at last that Stevie meant no harm, and as he had not heard Stevie's charge, he at last relented and let his aching wounds be soothed.

"I did not steal," said the boy. "My master's daughter and I love each other and the master caught us talking. He did not want to spoil his reputation and so he accused me of theft. Oh, I shall die now. I know I shall. The labor corps have yet to release a man alive. God curse this tyrant Graco!" Instantly he glanced about to see if he had been overheard, and then at Stevie to find out if Stevie might betray him for those words which would, of course, mean instant death.

"You call this king Graco?"

"Aye," said the boy. "For four long years this country has writhed beneath his crushing heel."

"Four years?" gaped Stevie. "But I was here day before yesterday and—" The look in the boy's eyes stopped him. "Four years. It doesn't seem possible. Tell me, where is Tedmur?"

"Ah, Tedmur," said the boy. "We went to sleep one afternoon from the great heat and the next morning, when we all woke, Tedmur was no longer queen. This Graco—may God spit on his soul—had already organized the worst of the troops to revolt. He was less than a speck of filth upon the city street. An informer for the police. But he had organized well. His men seized control. It would never have happened, never, if Tedmur had been here to prevent it."

"But where is she?" said Stevie in alarm.

"Who knows? She was in her palace the night before. People saw her enter. Some of her female slaves helped dress her as though for a state occasion. She would tell no one anything, but she seemed very sad. And the following day, when the city woke, the worst element in the army acted swiftly and took possession of the palace. Some say that Graco killed her and hid her body in the palace."

"Was . . . that is . . . did anyone say anything about a . . . a jinni?"

"Oh, yes," replied the boy. "Several people about the foot of the northernmost tower and the guard at the top all swore that they saw an Ifrit."

"You . . . that is . . . you don't believe in Ifrits?"

"Believe in them?" said the boy in a puzzled way. "Why . . . is there any doubt about Ifrits?"

"They . . . that is . . . they've been seen in the town before?"

"Why, certainly! The jinn of the desert are bad people, some of them very powerful. Those platforms you might have seen along the wall are fire platforms. The jinn cannot stand fire, praise God. The great towers are built to look like flame. Tell me," he said, "are you from so very far away that you do not know these things?"

"I . . . oh, yes. From very far away."

"Your clothes seem very odd. From beyond the desert?"

"Even farther," said Stevie wistfully.

"I cannot understand how you could have come here. Few people are even able to cross the desert alive, you know. An army tried it once, and even now, hunters sometimes bring in helmets and swords. The army wished to vanquish us but it was caught in the sandstorms

and suffocated—vanquished instead. The only thing we fear here is the jinn. They are a Godless tribe. Would that Sulayman had wiped them forever from the earth. He thought he had, you know."

"Are they . . . that is . . . are they very big, these jinn?"

"Big! Ten cubits tall at the very least! But they are stupid for all their command of magic. There are those who say that the jinn learned their magic from the wise men of old and only know the forms. Yes, they are stupid fellows, praise Allah. They are terrified of flames, and they cannot seem to act in orderly accord, being always at war with one another, never able to organize any attack methods in a body. Individualists, you might say."

STEVIE was struck by the manner of the youth's speech and his excellent choice of words. "If you'll pardon me, you seem to be . . . that is . . . you don't appear to be the kind of person I should imagine a slave would be."

The boy was instantly haughty, but, seeming to recall the good office that Stevie had performed for him, overcame the impulse to be harsh. "You would not know that, of course. I and my fellows are called slaves, certainly, and for four years we have known nothing but hardship. When Graco became tyrant, all the nobles of the realm were seized with all their goods. The more influential and the best-loved were put to death and all their families were given in slavery. The slaves were thus freed and became the masters. In theory, perhaps, it might be marked down as retribution. But there has never been hereditary inheritance of titles in this land and only those who benefited the community at large were raised to a high place. Their sons, because of breeding, perhaps, and education, could follow only on their own merits. Slaves themselves could purchase their own emancipation but most of them were too eager to be associated with the nobility in any capacity to wish ardently for a freedom which meant less protection and more arduous labor. My father was Ghaymen and I am Shakar."

"Then it is not ordinary spite which places you here," said Stevie.

"No, I am afraid that Graco would like to see an end of me, just as that petty burgher was anxious to find fault with me. But then," he added with a smile, "the lout who was my master has lost valuable property and has, in addition, been fined. And Graco—well, Graco has lost the youth who was once the best archer in the army. Spite blinds men to values, and because of spite, I am to lose my life. You will forgive my seeming weakness of an hour ago. I was almost insensible. My father in paradise would be ashamed to know that Shakar wept."

"If only Tedmur were here," said Stevie, "I know everything would be all right."

"I have prayed for that all these four years," said Shakar.

"You have no faintest idea of where she might be?"

"Or even if she be alive," said Shakar. "Tell me, my friend, you seem to have more than an interest in justice from our queen. If you had known her, you would—"

"Oh, I knew her," said Stevie. "That is, I saw her."

"But you said . . . you seem to know nothing of this town—"

"Oh, indeed I saw her!" said Stevie. "When this city slept, she reclined in all—" He stopped, realizing that it might be better not to tell this youth that the "night" might well have been centuries long.

"How is this? You know not these people but you know the city. You saw the queen. Where?"

"In . . . well . . . in her chamber."

"You were in her chamber?" gaped

the youth. "By the gods and devils, my friend, you must be a magician. But you seem to be human. No, forgive me. Of course you are human. But I do not understand how you could have seen her."

Stevie ached to tell Shakar about that strange period in the city while it was dead, about the Ifrit, about the queen and the tablet of gold. But he held his peace and talked casually.

"You are a strange fellow," said Shakar. "You have the face and brow of the scholar, of one who spends too much time alone until he doubts his own powers and quails before the world. I see that your arm is strong and your body lean. Perhaps I am too inquisitive."

"I . . . I might be called a scholar," said Stevie.

"And your name?"

"Jebson."

"Ah. Is that all of it?"

"Well . . . Stephen Jebson."

"Stephen! What odd sounds! El Stephen. Yes, that is easier to say. El Stephen abd Jebson."

Footsteps were coming down the hall and they stopped talking. The whole guard was there and in their center, resplendent in beautiful robes, stood Graco, his evil, thin face lighting up as he saw Shakar by the light of the captain's torch.

"You seem to have found your way here at last," said Graco. "I trust your sojourn under the banner will be brief, Shakar. Bring him out!"

Two troopers advanced, but, despite his wounded feet, Shakar brushed them aside and walked alone. With contempt upon his face he passed Graco and took up a position between the two files. Only once did his face soften and then it was to bid farewell to Stevie.

"Good-by," called Shakar. "And luck."

"You are as careless as ever about your company," said Graco. "Now you've made up to a ghoul. I think I am justified in those things I do. You are wanting in sense."

"That man a ghoul?" scoffed Shakar. "Ill-begotten spawn of filth, he is worth a thousand of you."

The bastinado cracked on the youth's naked back.

"Only my well-known clemency restrains me from altering your fate," snapped Graco. "You'll soon sing a different song."

They marched away while the prison guard slammed the door in Stevie's face.

THE LONG NIGHT began to drag its weary length. Stevie had no inkling as to his time of execution and he was not sure that he wanted to know. But he supposed it would be on the following day, the later the better. He was strangely calm. For all these bewildering weeks he had been unable to sit down and realize his position clearly; events had scooped him high. But he was becoming inured to surprise. If anything happened now, he thought, he would not even blink at it.

He had entered a story and the story was writing itself on and on and there wasn't anything he could do to stop it. He realized fully that the story had been tampered with and that he was the author of its strange continuance. But to author Graco! He shuddered. The man had no mercy in his unclean soul. If Tedmur had remained queen, none of this would have happened. But Tedmur was not queen.

He stirred restlessly, watching the stars through the barred window of his prison. For a while he traced out the constellations, feeling pleased that they, at least, had not changed.

This also brought him calmness. He smiled a little at himself for the stupid way he had been thrown about, for his inability to stop the events which had befallen him. He, who had once thought himself so wise, he who had

dreamed of being the friend of Launcelot and Galahad, Prince Diamond or Aladdin. How he had wished to throw himself back into their periods. He had told himself that he wouldn't have acted that way. No, indeed! But he had been as helpless before irresistible fate as any romantic hero. At times he had thought to himself, "Ah, if I could but go back there with my modern knowledge, I'd show them a thing or two." Well, he was back there and his modern knowledge had, so far, been so much excess baggage.

At midnight he told himself that he was a coward. At three he was certain of it. And with that he crossed the bridge. At four he was determined to combat it, and he fancied that perhaps the shades of all his heroes would at least approve of him if he gracefully went to his death. No, he wouldn't show them the white feather. He would march out and take it and never a sound would pass his lips.

Suddenly he felt better. A cold breath of dawn came into the dungeon and he watched the east grow pearl. He had not played an enviable part in any of this. He had not acted very like a man. But he would show them he knew how to die like one.

If only he hadn't blundered into that patrol! Or, if he had been brave enough to march forth to meet it, he would not be here now. Perhaps he would be searching for Tedmur—

He realized abruptly that he had no business getting killed. He was needed. He had struck that gong and had brought all this misfortune upon this town. But far more than that, he knew he wanted to find the beautiful girl who had seemed to smile a welcome at him.

But no, he would never find her. He could not even search for her. She was either dead or still asleep or— He sat up straight. Who had been in that town with him but the jinni? Who wished to bring evil to the City of Brass but the jinni! And what better way to further torture this city than to make off with the greatly adored Tedmur?

He threw himself down upon the straw to scowl bitterly into the grayness. What a witless fool he was! To walk into the arms of Graco when there was a chance of finding Tedmur. Rumor had it she was not there. Very well, he would find her. He would—

The footsteps of the pacing guard told him that the quest was ended before it began. In a few hours he would die. He tossed restively.

Something gouged him in the back and he moved it. They had been so afraid to touch a ghoul that they had not even searched him! With shaking hands he examined the revolver. Just this against a multitude? Just this? But it was certain death otherwise.

For the sake of Tedmur!

The thought gave him courage.

For the sake of Tedmur.

And so he waited until mid-morning brought the execution squad to collect its miserable quota for the public execution.

They did not touch Stevie. They signed him with the points of their swords to stay between the files. And then, through the low hallway, they moved forward, weapons clanking, toward the square before the palace where a few morbidly curious had gathered already about the six stakes set in the pave.

VII.

THE BRASS towers shone like two great swords in the sun and the blue sky was flawless—save for a coterie of vultures which hovered on still wings above the square in dignified expectation. Stevie looked at them and kept himself from shuddering. He was a coward, yes, but that, he told himself, was no reason to let everybody know it. He had been a witless dupe long enough, and now, whatever he did, he could not

possibly face a fate any worse.

The king's executioner was a towering, sullen eunuch, watched over by two slaves who blew upon a brazier to make the charcoal white-hot. There were metal rods lying in the grate, and Stevie was too well schooled in medieval lore not to know what they were and what was about to happen. But, however sick he felt, he made his face into a mask and went with unfaltering steps to the platform of the first stake. His guards were very anxious to get him secured, but their problem was complicated by the fact that not one would touch him. These men of the prison had none of the metal of the troopers. As a consequence their haste and anxiety combined into a slipshod lashing and they went on with the most perfunctory test.

Stevie wondered desperately if he would have courage enough to go through with his plan. And he wondered equally if his small might would prove of any consequence.

The wali and a squadron rode through the square and the wali paused for a moment, hand on his black beard, to look at Stevie.

"You would have it no other way than to see the ruler," said Asib.

"You might have told me Tedmur was no longer queen!" said Stevie resentfully.

Asib shrugged. "How was I to know that you did not know? You will forgive my part in the affair?"

Stevie was surprised that Asib should be concerned. "Yes."

"Thank you." Asib looked about him and saw that only his squadron was near. "Justice is not as it was once in this city. For that I could be in your place." He looked with poorly veiled contempt toward the palace. "I reported that another such murder was committed in the night in the same place. It was to no avail. I shall commend you in my evening prayers."

Gravely the wali raised his hand to the peak of his silver-inlaid helmet and spurred on, his troop clattering after him, leaving Stevie with slightly restored faith in the inhabitants of this city. First Shakai and now Asib. Perhaps they were not all blackguards.

The crowd had thickened like flies around a honey pot. The guard spread the word that the man at the first stake was not man but ghoul. There was a swift drawing away from the place, and then, seeing that Stevie did nothing, catcalls and a shower of stones came in his direction.

The executioner, Moseb, gave a grunt which passed for an order. A hot iron was handed to him, and he advanced upon the stake nearest him, which was on the other end of the line from Stevie. The victim, a ragged, diseased fellow, screamed. Stevie could not see what was happening but wind wafted to him the acrid odor of seared flesh. He felt sick and there was no strength in him. Fiercely he told himself that he would have to remain cool. But he doubted that he could.

After an interminable time, when water no longer revived the first victim, Moseb exchanged fire for his broad-bladed sword. There was a thump as though a guord had fallen. The world swam before Stevie's face.

"The ghoul!" screamed the crowd. "The ghoul! The ghoul! The ghoul!"

Moseb heard them. He was a showman in his way. He came toward Stevie and stared at him for some time, like a tailor about to make a man a coat. Moseb went back and juggled his irons, hefting them one after the other, as though he could tell their heat from their weight. Finally he chose one and, with smoke trailing back from it in a black banner, approached Stevie.

Knees buckling, heart thundering, arms like lead poles, Stevie watched Moseb approach. His brain screamed to him, "Now! Now! Now!" but he

had no nerve anywhere in him.

Moseb was within ten feet of him. The wind again brought the odor of seared flesh from the first victim. Suddenly the last ounce of despair splashed from Stevie's soul. And to take its place came a wave of hot rage. Rage against Bolton, against Graco, against the Ifrit and now against Moseb.

STEVIE LUNGED ahead. He felt his bonds slip. His wrists were not tied and he yanked them forward to his sides. Moseb, aware that he faced a "ghoul," stopped and thrust the iron like a fencer fends a lunge.

The guards sprinted toward Stevie, swords glittering. The crowd screamed as one man and dived backward. Stevie gave another wrench and his right hand was loose enough to be used. Moseb was starting ahead again.

The chill butt of the revolver was in Stevie's fist. His brain was a whirlpool. His rage filled him with strength and power he had never before known, with cunning he would not have believed.

"Back!" roared Stevie, pointing the gun. *"Back,* you devil's spawn! Your days are at an end! Tonight, Shaitan shall be thy bedfellow. I am master of thunder and death, and thunder and death are *yours!"*

The crash of the gunshot, magnified in these polished surfaces, came to the crowd like a clap of doom. Moseb, a full ten feet away, suddenly slapped both hands to his stomach and buckled into himself. He flopped backward. The big slug made only a small hole where it had entered, but Moseb's back was a gushing crater.

It was magic. It was magic greater than they had ever seen, to face a man and wound him in the back. And it was magic to Stevie, too. At ten feet a miss would have been difficult even for him, but he had not dreamed that he could make that shot count.

The paralysis which froze the crowd also seized the guards. Still in the attitude of charging, they played statue, foolishly ogling the screaming Moseb.

Stevie passed the gun to his other hand and wrestled with the primitive knot. It gave way. He was standing far off from himself, looking at himself in dull surprise. He didn't run for cover. He walked like a stiff-legged bully straight at those guards!

They were rooted only by terror. Their eyes got bigger and bigger and then their swords clanged to the pave and they arrowed for cover.

Stevie whirled. Two forgotten babies wept on the square. An old beggar held up his scrawny arms in mute supplication. No one else was in sight. In a moment, Stevie knew, people would rush toward the spot to see why other people were rushing away from it. It was a good quarter mile to the main gate. Along that route there were men who did not know he was a ghoul. But he could not stay here. He had five bullets left, and he might never get any more.

He sprinted down the wide street, tie flowing behind him, hair wild and eyes wilder. There were people ahead and guards at the gate; guards who might have seen the wali bring him in under arrest. His clothes stamped him.

But he had to try. And he dared not risk another bullet. Only five. If he only knew enough about guns to be sure where his shots might go! With savageness which amazed him, he told himself that he had to keep enough for Graco. Yes, Graco. He would kill Graco. The thought almost made him turn and go back. But a glance over his shoulder showed him that the palace guards, without any real information, were streaming from their posts like a hound pack.

The gate guard barred the way. Ahead two dozen troopers, men of steel and courage, had stopped to see what the uproar was all about. Suddenly they executed a movement which made Ste-

vie's overworked heart drop a yard. Glittering swords and brass helmets were across his way!

He would have to try another shot. But it would not avail him against such as these. One slash of a broadsword and he was done!

THEN, as swiftly as they had barred his way, the troopers fell into two lines, one on either side of the gate. Stevie gasped, both for breath and in amazement. A trooper had knocked a gate guard down with the flat of his sword!

The pack was baying behind. The way was suddenly open in front. The wali in the road made a sweeping motion with his arm which clearly said, "Come on!"

Stevie raced between the lines, straight at the wali. And Asib did an astonishing thing. He threw up his arms as though struck and fell from his horse!

Stevie had to jump to get over him and he heard a swift message, spoken low and urgent, "Take the charger and be swift in the name of my master, Shakar!" He followed this with a groan and dropped as though senseless.

Stevie grabbed the high arch of the saddle. The charger started and whirled, but Stevie's luck was holding. It veered under him as any trained charger should, practically throwing him into the saddle. The great animal reared and Stevie snatched the reins. The pack was close. Like a thrown spear, the charger sped through the gate and out over the hard-packed road, hoofs rolling like kettle-drums.

"After him, my children!" roared the recovered Asib to his men, vaulting up before a trooper. "After him!"

It made a fine scene for the wall guards. But the charger was a spirited runner and the saddle was too big to fall out of, and when Stevie looked back a mile farther on, the squadron was lost in his dust.

He continued to ride as though blown by a hurricane. A thundering hour passed and Stevie looked back in vain for the squadron. He eased down and left the road. He was glad to walk his mount for a change, even though, on such a thoroughbred, he did not find riding nearly as difficult as he had once supposed it.

Suddenly he grinned.

Said Stevie to himself: "I am a coward. Yes, there is no doubt about that. I am a coward, but I've found I don't have to act like one."

Far behind him he could see two bright spots on the horizon. Those brass towers were visible for an incredible distance.

Ahead of him he could see a cluster of mean hovels, almost lost beneath the scowling brow of a mountain. This lost settlement had mushroomed from the ruins of a feudal palace. And though it had every appearance of being a thieves' den, it was sanctuary to Stevie.

An old crone looked up from a doorstep and appeared blinded by the glitter of saddle and bridle. Stevie got down. He had no intention of stealing Asib's charger forever. This new cunning which had come to him said that it would be better otherwise. Such a trained animal would promptly go home. He dismounted and slapped the horse on the rump. It trotted away, heading back toward the twin bright spots far away.

The crone blinked at such a procedure. She blinked again at Stevie's odd attire. "From whence?"

"I am El Stephen. If you give me shelter you shall not be sorry."

She read a threat into it and made way for him to enter the hut. Without misgivings, Stevie entered the smoky, filthy interior.

VIII.

STEVIE WAS FAR too elated over his escape and too drunk with the sud-

den knowledge of his own capabilities to be overly careful of this place. The dank hovel had a wild-animal smell to it, and the floor was incredibly dirty. But it offered shelter and a moment to rest after a long night of sleeplessness. Certainly there was nothing to fear from the old hag who rubbed her toothless gums in the doorway.

He had not realized how body-weary he was, and now that there were four unhostile walls about him, he sank down on a pile of skins in a far corner from the door. He had intended to think over the best way of proceeding, but before he could snatch himself, he fell into deep slumber.

How long it lasted he could not be certain. It was dark and chilly when at last he opened his eyes and sat up. The pale rectangle which marked the door was now empty. Stevie was troubled, and he did not know why. And then he became aware of voices approaching and, finally, the thump of heavy feet. Men were coming and Stevie's heart began to thunder within him. But when he reasoned that they would not be making so very much noise if they were looking for a "ghoul," he grew easier.

Shadows bulked through the entrance and stopped. Evidently the three men had heard they had a visitor, and now wished to locate him.

Stevie forced himself to greet them: "Hello. I was forced to take shelter here this afternoon from weariness."

There was no direct answer. Finally, "I suppose he would not dare come here unless he was one of our kind."

The spokesman addressed Stevie: "By any chance, are you escaping from the city?"

It was heads or tails. Stevie took heads. "Yes."

"Ah, then, that explains everything." Immediately their mood lightened and they sat down around a cooking pot to stir some coals out of the ashes and lay fagots over them. One blew upon them and presently the small flames began to light the interior.

They were three very rough specimens. Their clothing was ragged and dirty, and the only bright things about them were their daggers, which they carried conspicuously in their wide leather belts. The spokesman had but one eye, and the empty socket of the other gave him a villainous appearance.

The spokesman signed Stevie forward. "I am Toreel. This jolly fellow here" —he pointed to a dour companion—"is Blofel. My tall friend prefers to be known as Denep."

"I am El Stephen."

"Sit down," said Toreel. "If you have business with me, it can wait until after we have eaten. And I tell you, El Stephen, we are not niggardly with our food these days. The bounty is good. You are hungry, doubtless, and we will set before you what we have. It is true, is it not, that you slew Moseb this morning?"

"Yes."

"Hah! That is a good joke. I heard some peasants pass me while I lay in some tall grass, and they were talking about it. Good work. I only wish I had had the chance."

"You had it once and paid with your eye," groused Blofel.

"Ah, but if I had it again!"

"You're safe. He's dead," snapped Blofel.

"I don't know how you did it, but it was a good trick," continued Toreel. He chuckled for a long time while the old hag boiled water and made ready with food.

Stevie felt fairly well at ease. These men did not seem so bad. In fact, they were pleasant to be with, so respectful was their address to him.

He had been rolling a white ball back and forth at his side without looking at it, feeling almost peaceful. The old hag opened the packsacks of the three and started to take out the fare.

Stevie almost fainted. By the hair, she held the severed head of a woman! Stevie glanced at the "white ball." It was a human skull!

These men, he knew on the instant, were *ghouls!*

But Stevie had been through so much of late that he hadn't much astonishment left in him. By a great effort he retained his poise while inwardly he screamed the question: "What will I do when I am asked *to eat?*"

"YOU see?" Toreel was saying, hand extended toward the three heads which now sat in a gory row on the hearth. "Every day for the past week we have gotten our game. It is fairly easy these days. Graco has things so disorganized.

"He pulled a good one today," said Denep suddenly, indicating Toreel. "He changed himself into a chicken and ran ahead of a girl, and when she thought she had free game he ran into a cemetery and she followed after. He is a good one."

"You . . . you . . . uh," choked Stevie, "find it difficult to do that?"

"No," said Toreel with the air of an old master. "I have been practicing for some time. Of course, you know, it isn't the easiest thing to do. To concentrate one's essence into the chicken soul is very, very difficult as you probably understand. What, may I ask, is your specialty?"

"Mine?" said Stevie, taken aback.

"Yes. Certainly you have some one trick you enjoy, even though you seem to come from a long way off."

They supposed him a ghoul! That was why they were so respectful. They knew all about it and—and supposing hey—they detected some unghoullike conduct on his part!

"Uh . . . trade secret," gulped Stevie.

"Well, if you wish to be that way, it is your own business. I make no particular secret of anything I can do. Lack of talent usually keeps others from emulating me, anyway."

"I could never change myself into a chicken," said Stevie. "It is much too difficult."

"Yes, I have been told that," said Toreel, mollified.

Stevie's wits were going at top speed. If these men found out he was not a ghoul they would eat him!

Blofel could stand Toreel's boasting no longer. "He has never been able to transform himself into an ass, despite the short way he has to go. He is afraid of getting stuck."

"Oh, is that possible?" said Stevie.

"Possible!" cried Toreel.

"I never have any trouble," said Stevie.

"Then your amulet is better than mine," said Toreel, fingering a string about his neck. "Blofel's, too. He got himself stuck in a donkey once. Took him three days to paw his amulet over so that he could get out."

"I got stuck in a pig once," said Denep.

"Do you," he added eagerly, "know any way to keep that from happening. Toreel there, even if he won't admit it, is in mortal terror of that chicken trick of his. He won't work it unless he has run through all the rest without bagging his game.

At this point, the pre-Moseb Stevie would have swooned with terror. But the post-Moseb Stevie had seen some of his own handiwork. Although his heart, he felt certain, would give him away by leaping straight out of his mouth and into his lap, he maintained his equilibrium.

"There . . . there is a way," he said hesitantly.

All three instantly leaned toward him, so close that he could smell their foul breaths.

"You . . . you wouldn't mind telling us?" said Toreel.

"Well . . . after all, I accept your hospitality." He was astounded at himself. He couldn't go through with this! He didn't have the nerve!

"There is a word—" He paused. "No, I really can't impart it. I was sworn to secrecy."

"But we're your friends!" cried Denep.

"I . . . I'll make you a bargain," said Stevie. "You tell me where I can find the Ifrit who bound the City of Brass in enchantment, and I'll tell you the word." There, he had said it. But how on earth could he make good?

Toreel laughed. "Why, that is very simple. But you must be far-seeing indeed to know about that enchantment. It was altogether too long to suit us, let me tell you." He grew sober.

"KAROOF might be angry—you being from the far countries, even though you *are* a ghoul. We have had some little trouble with Karoof. We tried, you know, to pilfer the city, but both my father and my brother were killed trying to scale the wall. When Karoof heard about it he was very angry with us. He didn't intend any real harm, of course, and he looks down upon eating humans—if you can understand such a ridiculous viewpoint as that! If he hadn't become enamored with Tedmur, he never would have done it. It was so much trouble, you know. It took him five years to get all the spells together and some say he had to go all the way to Harouk for some of the materials. It almost brought war upon his house, too. Those jinn are fools in a lot of ways. He went to all that trouble and spent all that time when all he had to do was steal her and have done with it."

"That's so," said Denep, turning a head on a spit and smacking his lips as he contemplated it. "But there was more to it than that. He offered her her city for her love and she wouldn't have him, so what could he do but carry through with his threat? Now, if I had been in his place, I would have taken her, whoosh, right out of her palace and starved her until she got some sense. But that's the trouble with the jinn. Some ways they're very bright and others they're terribly stupid. After Karoof had gone to all that trouble, do you think the other jinn would take advantage of it? No, they were angry at Karoof for working alone, and they wouldn't have anything to do with either Karoof or the city. And there it was, waiting to be sacked, cold meat all over the place—"

"What do they care about the money and things?" said Toreel. "They kept away because of Karoof, I tell you. By far and large he's the strongest Ifrit of the lot. They're terrified of him. He figured if he destroyed the city completely, he'd never get Tedmur to do anything but hate him. No, it's all very clear. The jinn stayed away because they were afraid of Tedmur. Karoof had to make good his word and drop the veil over the town. When it woke up out of time, what could he do but steal Tedmur?"

"I hear he went to her chamber about once a month and broke her spell and asked her if she relented," said Blofel. "Jinn are fools. A fellow like Karoff being stopped by a woman's 'no'! Fah, jinn are almost as bad as men!"

"Those are hard words," said Toreel. "Karoof has his good points. After all, he was in love."

"Where is he keeping Tedmur?" said Stevie, trying not to appear too anxious.

"He dug a house," said Toreel, "and put her in a dark chamber. At least, that is what they say. When she decides he is not so bad, she will become a queen of the jinn. But women are such fools."

"It doesn't matter much," said Stevie, "whether you tell me where I can find Karoof or not. I was merely curious to know what manner of Ifrit could accomplish such a mass spell. He might give me a few pointers." Could they hear his heart thunder? "And the word —well, it might not be important to you."

They leaned toward him again and their fangs and eyes gleamed with eagerness.

"Did I refuse?" said Toreel. "I tell you. Continue into the rising sun for four leagues. There you will find a palm grove. Continue toward the north star for six leagues. There you will find a palace. That is Karoof's. And now tell us the word."

"Y-yo-you have kept your part of the bargain," chattered Stevie. "T-th-the word is . . . is . . . is S-Subway-train."

They all rolled it around in their mouths.

"Indeed," said Toreel, "that sounds like a powerful word."

"It will support several . . . several hundred people," said Stevie.

"You seem frightened," said Denep.

"It . . . it was a secret. I should not have told."

"We will never impart it to another," said Toreel solemnly. "Have no fear. Are you sure this is all there is to it?"

SUDDENLY, seeing how easily duped they were, Stevie took courage and decided to plunge. "Well . . . no. There is a certain way in which it is said. But I couldn't . . . that is . . . I wouldn't be able to demonstrate it right here. You say it this certain way and then you make a mystic sign in the dirt and any time you . . . ah . . . get stuck, it will free you."

"What is the sign?" said Toreel.

Stevie drew a treble cleff in the ashes and horizontal-barred it.

"Hah!" said Toreel. "I shall have to try it. Right away!"

Stevie felt sick.

"Not you first!" said Blofel. "You want to show off your chicken."

"And you, your donkey!" said Denep to Blofel.

"And you, your pig!" cried Toreel in a rage to Denep.

Stevie took a deep breath and shut his eyes. "Why . . . that is . . . why don't all of you try it at once?"

"Good," said Toreel. "You are a wise ghoul."

Stevie blinked. Toreel hunched himself over, drew up his arms and clucked. Abruptly he fell away to a tenth his size. The chicken strutted around the fire.

Blofel made haste. He grabbed his

ears and yanked them and up they came as though they were on spools. He got down on all fours and pawed the ground. His bray made Stevie jump a foot. Denep had been very busy and Stevie was too taken with the sight of a donkey walking after the chicken to realize that this fat pig had been Denep.

The old hag chuckled in good humor when the donkey butted her over, and made a mock pass at the chicken. The pig grunted and pretended to steal the dinner.

Soon they grew weary of their sport and looked to Stevie.

"Now," said the chicken, "you show us that sign again and say the word the right way."

Stevie swallowed hard. "You . . . you'll each have to make your own sign. The second it is made you stare at it for three counts, then close your eyes for twenty counts and shout, 'Subwa-a-ay-trayen!' Have you got that?"

They each came around and looked at the sign, studying its construction. Stevie's eyes were fixed upon the amulets, which had survived the change, about the neck of each.

"Now, when I say 'ready,' you start the sign," said Stevie.

The donkey laboriously worked his hoof. The chicken elected to use his beak. The pig, because he could not see his work, was in the greatest difficulty. But they all finished within a short space of one another.

They stared at the sign and muttered, "One-two-three." They shut their eyes tightly and said, "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight—"

But Stevie was already in action. Seizing the amulets of donkey and pig, he gave a great yank. The old hag screamed. The chicken instantly leaped back. But Stevie already had his hand upon the cord and with a rip it, too, was off.

"You dog!" cried the donkey. "If this is a joke—" And he strove to kick Stevie. But Stevie skipped aside, unloosing his pocketknife. He snapped the blade open and this bit of magic gave them pause, for it appeared that the blade had sprung from his closed fist. The hag, thinking herself as good as dead, crumpled up in the corner in a dead faint.

"Be quiet!" commanded Stevie into the din.

Suddenly anxious to keep from enraging him in their defenseless states, the three kept still.

"I have need to go to the palace of the Ifrit," said Stevie. "You, Blofel, will carry me there. You, Toreel and Denep, will come along and make sure Blofel does not lose the way. When we get in sight of the place, I shall restore to you your amulets and you can return. But," added the post-Moseb Stevie, "one slightest move will bring all of you to your doom. I have greater magic than any of you have ever seen."

They stared at him dumbly while he made a halter out of some thongs and then, when he mounted, went docilely along.

"I am mad," Stevie told himself. "But I don't have to act like a coward!"

They faced east into the cool desert wind.

IX.

IN THE NIGHT the castle was luminous as the eyes of a cat. It raised three squat towers into the star-splashed sky and spread itself over a full acre of ground, but there were no lights whatever in its windows, embrasures or arrow slots. Stevie felt like a mouse looking at a trap. He reined in the donkey and studied the place with a sinking sensation.

"Are you sure this is it?"

"Yes," said the donkey.

"You'll find out soon enough," vowed the pig.

"You've done us enough harm already," said the chicken, "without tell-

ing Karoof. We'll thank you to keep still about that."

Stevie dismounted. He wanted very badly to turn and flee, but, with effort, he forced himself to remember the way the beautiful Tedmur had seemed to smile at him. And then, hadn't he bested Moseb? Hadn't he made fools of these three ghouls?

"I'll walk ahead," said Stevie. "And when I am a few hundred yards away I shall throw some sand over these amulets and you can come and search for them. That will give me time."

"Don't bury them very deep," said the chicken with anxiety. "I feel like I've been squashed and I tell you I've got no liking for scratching sand half the night."

Stevie walked toward the arched gates. If it weren't for those three ghouls, he would have found it more difficult to proceed. But they were watching him—and he almost smiled to think that he cared about the opinions of ghouls.

Before he had gone far he stopped and buried the amulets, brushing the sand evenly back over them. Hastily he went on. Plainly this place was deserted. Not a single light anywhere! But immediately he recalled what Shakar had said about the jinn. They were deathly afraid of fire, and, of course, it took fire of some sort to make a light if there wasn't any electricity to be had.

He stopped and glanced back. The ghouls were loping toward the spot where he had buried the amulets. It was too late to recover them. No, he had to get on with this mad project, though the memory of that gigantic Ifrit holding him out over space almost overcame his good resolutions to be brave henceforth.

Swiftly he proceeded. Behind him the ghouls were searching wildly for the amulets.

Stevie was within twenty feet of the gates when he saw the guards. He had expected demons of one sort or another, not helmeted soldiers with blue capes and long pikes. They looked human, although, he saw at once, they were about eight feet tall. And then they saw him and his knees almost buckled. They had cat eyes! And even in this pale starlight he could see the shaggy hair upon their arms and hands. As he drew nearer he saw that each had two fangs like boars which came up from the jaw to curve out over the upper lip. The hideous creatures were enough to turn his stomach.

He stopped and saluted them, but when he tried to speak he discovered that he had no voice. With a surge of will power he forced himself to speak.

"Good evening. I wish to see Karoof."

The two Ifrit soldiers stepped out from their posts against either side of the gate and peered into Stevie's face. Their nostrils, gaping holes in their faces, opened and closed as they sniffed at him.

"You are human!" said one in astonishment.

"Yes, I am human. I have business with Karoof. Take me to him immediately."

THEY LOOKED at each other. One shouted back into the limitless courtyard and boots ground upon the stone paving as an officer came up. He had a spiked steel helmet on his head from which drooped a neckcloth. His sword glowed with precious stones. Two huge emeralds dangled from his ears, which were covered with hair. His fangs glistened and his eyes glowed palely as he studied the intruder.

"He wishes to see Karoof. He is a human," said a guard.

"You are a madman," said the officer with decision.

"I wish to see Karoof," said Stevie, hoping they would not keep him standing here forever. His knees were going

to buckle and he was going to be sick from the wild-animal smell of them. His neck ached as he looked up into the captain's face.

"This is very strange business," said the officer. "No human has dared come to this place of his own accord in all its history. But perhaps you do not understand. You are not from the City of Brass."

"No. I come from a far land. I must see Karoof," said Stevie with feigned determination.

"Go away," said the officer. "Perhaps you are a Magian and intend some wicked thing."

Suddenly, a voice Stevie knew sounded behind him. "I am Toreel, the ghoul. You know of me. These are my friends, Blofel and Denep. This fellow is a sorcerer!"

Stevie whirled to see the three ghouls in their proper form.

"Yes, I have heard," said the captain. "On your way. We receive no ghouls here, much less humans."

"We are friends of Karoof," said Toreel. "He will tell you. I have spoken to him. This human is a sorcerer and he intends to cast a spell on Karoof and take his life. Your master will thank you to put him to death."

"You lie!" roared Stevie.

"This is no time to take chances," said Toreel.

"It is the word of a ghoul against mine!" cried Stevie in despair. "I have business with Karoof and he will have *you* put to death if you harm me." He wondered from whence he conjured this inspiration.

The officer scratched himself thoughtfully. Quite plainly he was undecided what course to take.

"You run a great risk to let this fellow live," insisted Toreel.

"And you run a greater, if you put me to death!" cried Stevie.

The officer scratched his neck, pushing his helmet askew. "Well, there's only one thing for it. Karoof will not be here until tomorrow. It is for him to decide. We have nothing to fear from a sorcerer," he added as warning to Stevie. "Seize him and carry him in."

The soldiers grabbed Stevie and, though they thought they merely led him, his feet were actually two feet off the ground and he swung like a leaf in the wind. He found an instant to glare back at the three ghouls who were laughing and making insulting gestures at him. Then they turned and went swiftly away, anxious to get home to supper.

The soldiers whisked Stevie down a long flight of steps and cast him into a damp, windowless room. A third soldier was on guard there, a stupid-looking jinn whose lower lip sagged down between his two brown fangs.

"Take care of him!" said the officer. "When Karoof returns his fate shall be decided."

The soldier bowed and the officer and guards went back up the steps and out of sight. Stevie walked forlornly around the cell. It had been so hard to get his courage up. He had keyed himself to a meeting with Karoof and a series of threats, and now he had only dark walls. The letdown was terrible. He sagged to a pallet of straw and sank into a state which admitted no feeling whatever—more of a stupor than sleep.

WHEN HE came out of it he knew he must have remained that way for hours, as he felt a little refreshed. He fumbled for and found the revolver. He fingered his other belongings, fountain pen, pocketknife, a box of matches and some old letters. He became aware of light in the place and saw that the rising sun let a thin shaft through the grates of the door.

He stirred, and the acute ears of the guard heard him. Stevie started as he saw the brutish face and the staring eyes in the grate. Hastily he put away his

belongings. He could not risk losing them. In a land where weapons were bows, swords and daggers, all visible, he could get by unless he was spied upon. The guard, who had never seen pockets in clothes, wondered at the vanishing of the mysterious objects. Holding his pike before him, he unbolted the door and came in with threatening mien. Stevie felt that all was lost.

"What have you there?"

"Nothing," said Stevie.

"Give them to me!"

"On your head be it," said Stevie. "They were presents for Karoof, and what if he hears that a mere guard took them?"

The Marid was uncertain. His was not the intelligence of the Ifrit.

Stevie, suddenly heartened by such weight given to a statement, pushed bravely on. "Have a care with me, as I am very angry. I came to see Karoof and find that his guest chambers are like stables."

"He has fine guest chambers!" defended the Marid.

"Fah!" said Stevie. "If he should come to my palace, I would never give him such a hovel. Admitted, he does give me a guard to protect me, and for that I thank him; but for his bed, I can never forgive him."

The upsetting effect of this upon the Marid was like tonic to Stevie. He knew well the artifices of his heroes.

"He has great trouble, and I am here to relieve him of them. After he sends for me and I come from my far land, am I to be so treated? I have more important business than this."

"You were to help him?" gawped the Marid.

"Of course. Do you think Tedmur will listen to any jinni? Only a human can convince her of the course of wisdom. When Karoof asked me to try my hand, I told him I had little time, and now, see what is happened. A stupid officer delays me an entire night! Is not Karoof here yet?" He trembled lest he had pushed this thing too far.

"We will know when he arrives. The trumpets will sound. But do not be angry with me. I have nothing to do with this. I am but a poor Marid, acting under orders, and if the captain has erred, then it is on the head of the captain."

"If you can so convince Karoof, you'll escape, of course. You have nothing to worry about."

But the doubt was in the head of the Marid. Well he knew the penalty of stupidity in the service of such an Ifrit. It meant one eye at the very least.

"I shall speak for you," said Stevie, "and perhaps all will be well. But I am losing so very much time and I have so much to do. It will take hours to convince Tedmur even for a man of my understanding."

"He has had so *much* trouble with her," said the Marid.

Stevie grew more cunning. He took out the fountain pen—and it seemed to come from the empty air. He took the back of an envelope and said: "I shall send a note to the captain." He began to write.

The Marid stared at the work in astonishment. Stevie had no ink pot and that little stick was very small. And lo! it was covering that whole piece of strange stuff with words.

"That pen," ventured the Marid. "Is it magic? You have no ink pot and it goes so swiftly."

"This?" said Stevie, offhand. "Why, yes. It was given to me by the King of Broadwayanforty-secondstreet."

"He must be very powerful with such a name," gawped the Marid.

"Nor is that all the power this has," said Stevie. "It protects the wearer from all harm. See, it writes forever."

"It must be worth a great deal."

"Oh, I suppose it is. I have no great need for such baubles."

"Maybe . . . maybe I could bring

you something and you . . . you could . . . perhaps . . . give it to me?"

"This?" said Stevie. *"Give* it to *you?"*

"Well . . . I know it must be worth a great deal. Please do not tell Karoof that I asked."

"Wait," said Stevie, as though it was an afterthought. "You can do me a service and serve Karoof as well. I tell you I must get about my business and your master may not be here for hours. Take me to Tedmur right away and closet me with her so that I can do Karoof this favor, and I shall give you this magic pen." He added: "Karoof's gifts to me will doubtless make up for it."

The Marid's eyes gleamed. But he was afraid.

Stevie shrugged. "Very well. Delay me. Delay me and take the consequences. I care not what happens to a mere Marid. Now please leave me. I hate stupid fellows."

"No, please. Do not be angry. If I stand guard outside her door, nothing whatever can happen. I am that guard, you know. If anything is wrong . . . but then, how could it be? If you did not know all about this thing, you would not risk letting Karoof catch you there. Of course not. It would mean instant death for you, and you would not risk that."

Stevie shuddered but kept his voice calm. "There, I did not think you were stupid. Take the pen and show me to the door."

The guard peered up and down the corridor, and then led Stevie forth. Greedily the Marid snatched the pen. He almost missed the trap in the floor, he was gazing so fondly at his new possession. However, he stopped and pried out the ring and lifted up the great slab of stone with such ease that Stevie clearly understood the enormous strength with which he had to deal. It was like using a bean shooter on a grizzly bear, that was it. No, not the revolver.

The Marid picked him up and dropped him into the hole. The jar almost broke Stevie's legs. The slab thumped back into place, and he groped about him, finding a wall and following it. At last he saw a shaft of sunlight coming through a grate in the ceiling. The room ahead was draped with silk and great rugs covered the floor. The luster and color of it, even in this dimness, was astonishing.

TENSED and watchful after hearing the slab drop back, Tedmur sat nervously upon a low divan. She was more beautiful than ever and her smooth white skin matched the texture of the soft fabric which clothed her. Great strings of pearls adorned her neck and a single diamond blazed in her glorious hair. Stevie felt as though the sight of her was a blow with a soft hammer. Even in this urgent instant, he was stupefied by her beauty. He was afraid to talk to her.

"What ruse is this?" she challenged in a commanding tone.

Stevie blinked.

"You have tried everything without avail. Do not hope, O Karoof, to place reliance in such an outlandish costume. Begone. I spit upon you and revile your name and house. Seek to touch me and I shall destroy thee!"

"No," said Stevie. "No, please. You've got me wrong. I'm not Karoof. I . . . I am El Stephen. I come from a far land. I am human, not jinni!"

"Seek not to triumph with such lies. Change yourself into a bull or a butterfly and the answer is always the same. I hate you!"

Stevie crossed to the center of the floor. "You don't understand. I've come to take you back to the City of Brass. Graco slaughters the people and enslaves the noble. I am El Stephen. I come from a far land—"

"I did not credit thee with such devious ways, Karoof. But now that you

have shown your cunning, begone. You have failed."

Stevie faltered. It was hard to take such a tone from this lovely woman. Of course, it was all for Karoof, but it hurt just the same. And more, there was little time to lose. Karoof was due this day, perhaps was coming even now—

"Do not argue," said Stevie. "I am El Stephen, not Karoof. I owe you this because I . . . I feel responsible for what has happened to your city. Somehow I shall get you out of this place—"

She laughed at him. "Karoof, you know that you cannot succeed. Why do you keep trying? First a beardless boy, prisoner of the jinn. Then a shepherd. Then a king who had just 'conquered' the place. All staged to disarm me. And now this. True, you have done an excellent job this time. You look very human and have even concealed the points of your ears. And, as a human, you are not bad to look upon. Even, I might say, handsome. But assume thy true form and stop this stupid nonsense. Am I a witless girl?"

"Tedmur," said Stevie in a pleading tone, "I am but human. I know nothing of this strange necromancy of the jinn. My world is mad. Yesterday I almost dined with ghouls, last night I rode a ghoul to this place. I am in a strange realm without great powers. But I feel I have wronged you, and so I am here to make amends if that is possible. I've managed to bribe a guard to let me in here, and if we do not immediately plan our leave-taking, Karoof will return from some journey he undertook and all will be lost."

"Karoof, how witless you are! You know that I know that no being would risk this thing. To be found here with me? It would be a horrible punishment. How could anyone pass those guards? No, such bravery has not yet been known in the City of Brass. I have been here all these years, outwitting you at every turn. And has any army come to me from my city? How then could one man brave such a thing? Yes, you are a fool, Karoof."

"What I say is true!" wailed Stevie. "You must come with me! Quickly! Your people thought Graco had killed you. They know nothing of this Ifrit. Some thought they saw one, but it is not generally believed. Your city does not even know it slumbered for years. It thinks but one night passed and that Graco had you killed and buried within the palace when he overthrew the wazirs."

"Graco, you say? Graco." She tried to place the name, puckering her white brow. "Graco! Yes, the police informer! The man of a thousand wiles. You mean that *he* is king? Graco?"

"Yes."

"When you first said it I thought it was so much talk, but— You have a strange air about you. You sound as if you speak the truth. You do not lisp as does the jinni. . . . But begone! These are lies."

"They are not!" cried Stevie. "You must return to the city and take your rightful place on the throne. I have come to return you. Make haste in the name of God before that Ifrit returns!"

She gave a start and stared at him. "Would you go that far? To use the name of God? You, an Ifrit?" Plainly she was bewildered, but the instant Stevie, thinking he had gained his point, advanced toward her she threw herself away from him in scorn. "Not so soon, Karoof. Not—"

"Listen!" whispered Stevie.

She stopped. Loud footsteps rang overhead.

Stevie felt sick. He had stretched his courage as it was, and now, to be trapped here with Tedmur, at the mercy of Karoof— He gagged as he remem-

ORKAN.

bered dangling over empty space. Those horns, those eyes—

The ring grated in the stone and there came the voice of the Marid, shaking a trifle in an agony of fear: "Perhaps she sleeps, O Karoof."

"You speak to me thus?" roared a mighty voice. "Who are you to advise *me!*" The crash which followed jarred the walls. The Marid did not speak again.

The stone slab moved harshly upward and the corridor light came down in the lower passageway, to be blotted the next instant as a gigantic foot intruded.

Tedmur whispered: "O, God! I have been thy death, my courageous one."

Stevie was so much jelly.

SUDDENLY the foot withdrew back into the corridor and there came an angry mutter as Karoof told the unconscious Marid: "Thou nauseous odor! You have upset me with thy chatter."

In the following short space of silence, the girl whispered: "He comes as a young man so not to frighten me. Quick! Hide yourself behind that curtain. Perhaps he will leave if I make him angry."

Stevie recovered himself enough to move behind the curtain, but he almost fell flat when a stool got underfoot. Tedmur smoothed the drapery and flung herself down upon the couch.

A moment later, a young man in silken raiment and golden armor dropped lightly into the passageway. Stevie could see hazily through the weave of the fabric which covered him, and, though the thought of Karoof made him stop breathing, he was somewhat heartened by that young fellow's charming appearance, yet fearful lest the Ifrit change again into a horned and hairy monster.

"Good morning, O Tedmur," said Karoof in a milk-and-honey voice. "I flew swiftly, so great was my anxiety to see you. I had a dream, an ugly dream. A sorcerer had tried to steal you away, but, ah, how relieved I am that it was not true. But how pale you are!"

"I am pale with illness at the sight of you!" said the scornful Tedmur. "I have prayed all during your absence that fire might consume you!"

"No," said Karoof. "Do not say that. You hurt me. Can I never change your feelings toward me? Must you wear out these weary years fighting me? I, who can lay the wealth of all lands before you, who rule the jinn, am not as disgusting as that."

"You have pointed ears," mocked Tedmur.

He fingered them ruefully.

Stevie gripped the revolver. But he dared not risk a shot. Even if he succeeded in killing this Karoof—a feat which he distrusted—the sound would bring the guards, and angry guards they would be. He was weak with terror. Even if the noise had not prevented it, he was shaking too badly to risk such a thing. And this monster could crush him with one hand without half trying. He was shaking so, he was certain that the brute could see the silk quiver.

Smoothly, Tedmur changed her tactics. "Leave me now. I shall grow angry with you if you persist in bothering me. Even this terrible loneliness is better than your company."

"Some day," said Karoof in an abrupt change of voice, "you will anger me, Tedmur! I show you every possible courtesy. I do not even intrude my true, powerful self upon you. I have given you everything a human could dream of! I warn you, you will carry this coldness too far. Even my love for you has begun to crack under this constant cruelty. You know my strength!"

"I spit on your strength! Leave me. I grow weary of your boasting." Her

anxiety was carrying her into dangerous channels.

"You see me this way. Perhaps you would rather I took on my true form!"

"No! Do not, I beg you."

Stevie shivered. Maybe the keen sense of smell of the jinni would return if that happened!

"Ah, I frighten you," said Karoof, advancing.

"Leave me! I command you!"

"That dream," said Karoof. "I do not intend to let you slip through my fingers." He came closer to her and, of course, closer to Stevie behind the couch. Stevie could hardly keep his teeth from chattering, and he kept seeing that awful, five-hundred-foot drop below him. These tones were now the tones of the true Ifrit.

Tedmur drew back across the couch. "You have tried that before!"

"And you bit me. I care nothing for your small, blunt teeth!" He was within reach of her now, and suddenly his hand shot out and fixed itself upon her shoulder in a crushing grip.

It was an awful thing, to hear that terrifying voice issue from such a handsome person, to see the strength in that apparently tender hand.

Tedmur did not cry out. She struggled to free herself. But the monster's grip was not to be loosened. He fell to his knees upon the couch and sought to pull her close to him, but Tedmur spun away. He tightened his hold as she sought to pull free into the center of the room. He was so effortless in what he did he did not even bother to rise. He was crushing her wrists.

"I have waited too long!" he roared.

STEVIE SAW the back. He saw the terror in Tedmur's eyes. But more than that, a powerful surge of rage shot through him that this unclean brute should touch such a lovely person. Stevie parted the drapery. He raised the gun butt on high and the movement caught Tedmur's glance. She stared an instant too long. The Ifrit, sensing something behind him, started to turn.

With every ounce of his strength, Stevie struck down. The blow was sufficient to break the skull of almost anything. The Ifrit reeled back, fighting to stay erect, voice opening for a scream of rage.

Again Stevie struck. And again and again, and with each blow his strength grew greater. Karoof fell to his knees, his eyes glassy. Again Stevie hammered the skull. Karoof sagged to the floor. Gradually the fine white skin of the youth began to vanish under a mat of hair. Slowly the body expanded. The helmet and cloak fell away and the two horns appeared in the skull. The bulk of him almost filled the great chamber at last.

Stevie was suddenly as weak as he had been strong. The awful stench of the Ifrit and the memory of his power almost overcame Stevie. But Tedmur acted like light. She snatched up the golden helmet and put it upon Stevie's head. She threw Stevie the bundle of clothing the Ifrit had worn.

"Put them on and be quick for the love of God."

Stevie brought himself around. He moved behind the curtain and quickly donned the boots and silken robe. He dropped the cape over his shoulders and pulled the neckcloth of the helmet about until it almost hid his face and fully covered his ears.

When he faced Tedmur again she gave him a hasty scrutiny to make certain there was nothing wrong. Stevie was putting his scant belongings into his sash before he buckled himself round with the ornate sword. He stared at his pocketknife and then the Ifrit, wondering if he could further remove all danger from that source. He opened the blade, wondering a little at his own bloodthirstiness.

"Come quickly. Your steel would not touch him!"

Stevie put the knife away and followed her into the passageway. She had slipped small riding boots upon her feet and thrown a blue silk cape about her. She stopped under the open slab so that Stevie could boost her up to it. She reached it, and Stevie lifted her farther until she was on the floor of the corridor above. He was in an agony of apprehension for fear the Ifrit in the chamber would come to.

Tedmur dropped the Marid's coat down to him, and while she braced it against the edge, he climbed it. When he got to the top his first glance was for the Marid, but he saw with relief that that fool had departed this life, his skull smashed like a shattered glass ball. Automatically Stevie picked up his pen.

"We must be casual," said Tedmur fiercely. "They will think you Karoof and think that I have at last consented to be his wife. If one word or sound betrays us, we are lost."

They began to stroll down the corridor and passed Stevie's cell. They climbed the steps which led into the courtyard and were almost blinded by the brilliance of the sun. Several guards lolled about and others patrolled the walls. The night guard captain was nowhere to be seen but in his place was a horror of a fellow whose hairy arms hung down to his knees and whose tusks reached almost to his eyes.

Tedmur leaned happily upon Stevie's arm and cried: "It is worth it. One glimpse of this sunlight makes me love you, Karoof." And she laid her head on his shoulder.

Stevie managed a smile. Strange how much courage he had when she was so close to him. For a moment he felt that he could take on all these fellows single-handed, and then, when he recalled Karoof, wanted to run out into the desert as hard as he could go.

She stopped before the guard captain. "Karoof, to celebrate, will you let me order horses? I want to enjoy the sun and air."

Stevie nodded and lifted his hand to motion the guard captain away. The fellow, in common with the others in the yard, was trying to hide a wise, knowing grin.

"Immediately," said the captain and then turned to shout his order to the men.

Waiting there those next five minutes was the hardest thing Stevie had ever done. But with Tedmur to steady him he managed to retain his casual air. He told himself this brilliant helmet's glare helped to hide his features, but still he could not be sure.

Presently the horses were brought up.

"An escort, my master?" said the guard captain.

"Are you not powerful enough to take me alone?" said Tedmur. "Please, Karoof, can I not be alone with you?"

Stevie nodded his head.

The captain helped Stevie assist Tedmur into the saddle, and the contact of those hairy hands with their claw tips almost made Stevie give himself away. As quickly as possible he mounted.

With a laugh, Tedmur slapped her mount with the reins and raced out of the gate, calling, "Let's see you ride!"

STEVIE was fast on her heels. She stayed in advance with the sand spurting up from her mount's hoofs and her cloak billowing out until they saw the palace grow small behind them.

Stevie wanted to shout and sing. He had done it! He had done it! Moseb, the ghouls, and now *Karoof!*

He came up on Tedmur's right.

"We must be fast," said Tedmur urgently. "He may regain consciousness. Keep a watch to the east, and if you see a black cloud, we are lost!"

They rode as hard as they could. Far, far ahead the twin spots of light which marked the towers of brass even at that

great distance gave both of them heart.

Flailing their mounts, they raced toward their goal, side by side, looking backward every few seconds to see if the sky was clear. Brighter and brighter grew the towers. And finally they reached the outermost limit of cultivation. Peasants stopped their tilling to stare at them as they thundered past. Through the fields they raced, leaping ditches and crude fences until they came to the smooth rode which ran, straight as an arrow, to the main gate which pierced the black walls before them. The great towers were growing taller and taller as they approached.

"There is still Graco," said Stevie.

She smiled at him and the sight of it and the meaning of it made him giddy. "You'll take care of Graco," she said with confidence.

Soldiers and guards be damned, thought Stevie.

On they raced, and then, when it seemed they would be able to throw a stone into the city, Tedmur, looking back, cried out in despair. Stevie beheld a black cloud, like a tornado, swooping out of the east. The black pillar raced upon them with such speed that they seemed to be standing still.

The guards on the walls a thousand yards ahead also saw it. The great gate screamed on its hinges as men rushed it closed. Trumpets blared to mobilize troops.

"We can't make it!" cried Tedmur in despair. "And those cowards of the town will never sally forth. We're finished." She pulled her mount to a rearing stop, and Stevie, seeing the hopelessness of it, stopped, too. She swerved in beside him and leaned out of her saddle to throw her arms about him. She swept aside her hood and pressed her cheek to his.

"This try was better than slow death there," she sobbed. "You are worth even these fleeting hours. I love you, and I shall die with you!"

The world rocked before Stevie. So much was happening that he could not keep track of it. The black pillar was throwing dust ahead of it and then the sun went out. Stevie stared up. One hand went to the hilt of the sword, the other to the revolver. He knew how useless it was. He had beaten the monster's skull until his arm ached and the thing could still be unharmed. What good would a bullet do?

He glanced back at the town and saw that men were rushing torches to great pots of oil placed along the embrasures. Fire! Fire! That was the answer!

He slammed the sword back into its scabbard. He thrust the revolver into his belt. From the sash he yanked the box of matches. How small they were and how great was this settled cloud!

SUDDENLY THE smoke congealed and Karoof was towering over them, talon hands outstretched to snatch up both horses and riders.

"The dream was true!" he bellowed. "And for this deception you have earned death!"

There was no escape. Karoof's household troops were all about them, standing ready to repulse any attempt of the town, leaving sweet vengeance to their master.

Stevie swept the golden helmet from his head and shouted as loud as he could: "Witless ape! You are finished! When you caught me in the tower, I vanished in your hand! When—"

But Karoof roared his surprise and bent over to stare at Stevie's face. "You! *You* who broke my spell and brought this city back! *You* who ruined all my work! By Gog, spawn of Shaitan, you'll never escape me now! Your crimes have found you!" In an excess of rage he snatched downward at Stevie's horse.

Suddenly Stevie struck the light. Karoof's grip was too harsh to be stopped, his rage too great even to see

fire. He yanked Stevie out of the saddle and lifted him high to smash him against the earth.

The flaring match went out. Stevie, his breath squeezed out of him, feeling that all his ribs must be broken, fought to strike another. He did so and as it burst into hot light he stabbed toward the Ifrit's face with all his might.

Karoof screamed until all the walls of the city shook. The match bit into his flesh. There was a spurt of smoke as though powder had been ignited.

Dropping Stevie from twenty feet in the air, Karoof slapped both hands to his face. Stevie grabbed at the billowing black cloak, almost pulling his arms out of their sockets. Rapidly he slid down. When he reached the bottom he fought the impulse to race away. He struck another match and touched the hem of the great silk robe. It began to burn as only dry silk can burn.

Only then did Stevie dart back. He scrambled into his saddle and the horse pivoted with a shriek of fear at the proximity of flame. But Stevie had been too intent upon Karoof to see the others. And they, all armed, ringed him round. Tedmur guided her horse up beside him. It was impossible to speak in the din of Karoof's bellows of rage and fear.

Stevie looked up and shuddered. Karoof's whole hairy face was ablaze. The robe was roaring all about him. The brute was as combustible as tinder. No wonder these jinn feared flames. They themselves were hardly more than smoke and energy, only waiting the touch of fire.

The great feet were stamping in agony and the earth shook. Karoof, knowing he was doomed, tried at the last instant to smash his human assailant. Stevie avoided the feet with difficulty because of his terrified horse. It seemed to be snowing, but it was a light white ash, still glowing.

The roar of flames smothered the screams of Karoof now. He crumpled to the road, writhing. The heat from him was torture.

The surrounding Marids, Shaitans, Auns and Ifrits were drawing back from Stevie in a panic. They had seen a blaze leap three times from his hands.

Tedmur cried out into the sudden silence: "Hold! Go not and come not lest ye, too, be destroyed by this master of the flame. Draw together, for he would speak!"

They took one last look at Karoof's ashes and did as she bade them. Stevie collected himself enough to do what was expected of him.

"I take thee as loyal subjects of the Queen Tedmur and extract from you your oaths that you will never again approach this city out of time when not commanded to do so. If you fail, my magic fire will find you!"

"We hear and obey!" they cried.

"Leave us!" commanded Tedmur. "Your master goes to attack this town and destroy its ruler. Carry the word to all the jinn that they must come within the month to bring tribute and tender their allegiance to the crown!"

"We hear and obey!" shouted the assembled, glad to get off so easily. They did not even dare dissolve in smoke, but raced across the fields toward the east, soon vanishing.

STEVIE FACED the town. The walls were lined with soldiers and now with citizens, all of whom had witnessed this sight. The labor corps gawped from their posts at the oil pots. Stevie urged his mount ahead, and with Tedmur at his side, approached the great gate, replacing his helmet as he went.

She was starry-eyed as she looked at him. She thought nothing whatever of his conquering an entire town single-handed. Her attitude clearly said that all he had to do was command.

Moseb, ghouls, Karoof and now Tedmur's eyes. There was no holding

Stevie. He dashed into the shadow of the gate.

"Open! Open in the name of Tedmur!"

There was a stir in the watchtower above, and then Graco, who had not seen the death of the Ifrit, and who now silenced all those who sought to speak to him, called down: "O ye of little wit, Tedmur is dead even as thou shalt be! Archers, forward!"

There was a mutter of protest and then, again, Graco's harsh voice lashed into them. "Archers!"

His own guards mounted the embrasures and fitted arrows to their bows. Stevie realized suddenly that he had lost his best trick. He could not shoot Graco at that distance. These people did not recognize the man who had done for Moseb. Desperately he tugged at the revolver as his last, forlorn hope.

Suddenly there was a scurry and rush and the nearest archers whirled to face a youth who was fury itself.

"Shakar!" cried Stevie.

The youth wrested the bow from the first and felled the guard. And then, almost as fast as arrows could fly, he fitted them to the bow. The swift song of the bowstring accounted for five archers in nearly as many seconds.

But Graco was never far from safety. He darted back and vanished. An archer, shot through the throat, plummeted down beside Stevie, making his horse shy.

The great hinges sang as the gates swung open. Asib and his men were pressing the breasts of their mounts against the heavy iron. Asib bowed reverently to Tedmur and then was startled upright by the sight of Stevie's face.

"El Stephen!" he cried.

"Where has that dog gone?" cried Stevie.

"To the palace with his personal troops! Form squadron!"

But Stevie was not waiting. He lashed his mount with the reins and shot down toward the palace steps a quarter of a mile away along the glittering street. Behind him Asib's roar was lost. Behind him Shakar's thin wail of despair dissolved in the wind. And then, to the thunder of his own mount's hoofs was added that of Asib's squadron. And above it all rolled the silver notes of Tedmur, who cried: "Rally, archers! Rally, you fools! Cover his attack!"

Stevie was drunk. His speeding mount overtook the last stragglers of Graco's troops. The men already within the palace strove to close the doors.

With a leap Stevie's mount took the steps, his strong breast bursting the portals wide before they could be closed.

"Graco!" bawled Stevie, stabbing hand to belt for his revolver. And then an empty feeling rushed through him. The gun, which he had half pulled out in the shadow of the outer gate, had fallen from his sash in that swift ride!

An arrow sang past his ear. Another clanged and broke upon his helmet. And then, ahead of him, he saw Graco, standing on the diwan, sword in hand and all his troops about him.

IT WAS too late, much too late, to retreat. Asib's men were still far behind. Stevie did the only thing he could do. He laid hand to his own hilt and with steel twanging from its scabbard, dashed his horse straight at Graco.

Another arrow took him in the left arm. He swung the sword at a soldier and felt the weapon drink. A thrown dagger scored his breastplate as the mount vaulted to the diwan.

Graco swung his steel madly. It struck, and stuck in the thick leather of the saddle. He wrenched at it and dodged Stevie's first wild blow. Graco got his weapon back and two-handed it for another hard hack.

Stevie leaped back and out of the saddle on the other side. He felt rather than saw a soldier strike at him and

dodged, catching the blow on his golden shoulder plates. He heard Graco's sword strike the saddle too late, its wielder unable to stop the weighty blade once started.

Darting ahead of the horse, Stevie rushed, blade outthrust. Graco leaped back, only to bring up against the silver throne. Stevie felt the jolt of his blade and saw Graco's hawk face go sickly gray. He expected the tyrant to fall, but he did not. Nor could Stevie free the sword. Graco was pinned to the throne, pierced through and through.

A blur of action to his right made Stevie wheel. And then he staggered back, suddenly weak with relief, suddenly possessed of an insane desire to laugh. Asib's men were cleaning up what remained of Graco's personal guard, though most of them were too cowardly to fight.

Tedmur was dismounting at the door and Stevie bethought himself of Graco. The man was dead. Stevie kicked the sword loose and pulled it out to topple the tyrant out of the seat and down the steps of the diwan. He stood ready to help Tedmur to seat herself after he had thrown his cloak over the back to sop the blood. Daintily she stepped over Graco.

But Tedmur stopped, shaking her head. Her smile was slow and sweet. "It is not fit, my master."

Stevie was embarrassed. "But . . . but it's yours!"

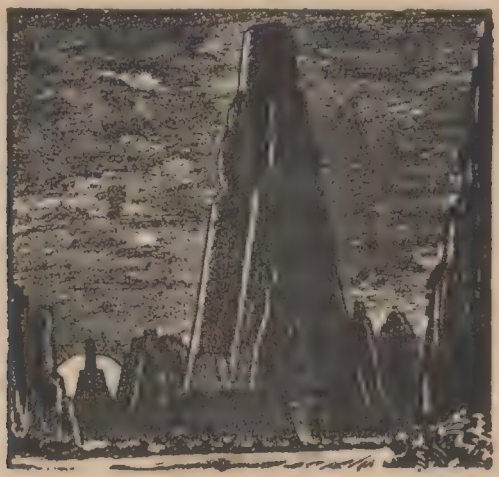
"And yours," said Tedmur, "if . . . if you want me."

The room reeled around Stevie. Shakar arrived just in time to hold him up on one side while Asib supported him on the other.

"Offal!" bawled Shakar at the soldiers. "Don't stand there with your jaws unhinged. El Stephen, King of the City of Brass, wishes to rest. Go!"

WHEN BOLTON arrived the following month, that is the way he found things. Two thrones, side by side. A mystified guard had picked him up outside the city gate and, in all haste, had rushed him straight before the king and queen, who, as it was morning, sat in judgment.

Bolton did not recognize Stevie in El Stephen, and there was little wonder, not only because of the brilliant crown and silken robes, but because a subtle



change had come over the man.

"Your majesty," gaped Bolton, "I am a traveler from another plane. I demand your mercy. I was under the impression that this was a city of the dead and I had no idea—"

"My dear," said El Stephen to Tedmur, "this fellow is an evil one from my country. I should like to converse with him alone."

"I hear and obey," said Tedmur, touching his hand with a caress. "Asib, clear the hall."

Bolton looked fixedly at El Stephen. "You . . . ah . . . no! It can't be! You . . . I forget your name! What masquerade is this?"

Stevie got up. He carefully took the crown from his head and laid it upon the seat of the throne. Then he shucked off his robe of honor and began to roll up his sleeves.

"Doctor," said Stevie, "because I owe you a great deal, I am going to make this as light as possible. But to make sure you never came back, I think you had better have a lesson which will deter you from invading realms where you are not wanted."

Bolton blinked. This couldn't be the skinny little fool who had acted as his guinea pig! Not this hard-bodied devil!

"Wh-a-what are you going to do?" said Bolton.

Stevie didn't talk. He did it. Bolton went skidding halfway down the glass floor. Stevie followed him up. Bolton stayed down. "Please! Please, I didn't mean any harm. I—"

Stevie picked him up and knocked him down again. Bolton scrambled away like a crab, whining. His coat was ripped open and a cartridge belt glinted. Bolton started to draw and then nursed a wrist which felt like it was broken.

Stevie picked up the weapon and savagely unbuckled the belt. Systematically he emptied Bolton's pockets of all manner of bric-a-brac, including a manual of industrial chemistry.

"You were prepared for a long stay," said Stevie.

"How did I know? You were gone a month and . . . and I had already calculated that the second trip would be the final trip for anyone. I decided to risk one trip to get some of these jewels you talked about and—"

"So you didn't think I'd come back a second time. And yet you let me go out to God knows where. Well. It happens that it didn't kill me. And what you say is true. I'll end my days in this place, and that I want to still doesn't lessen your crime."

He yanked Bolton to him and made certain of the search and then he called: "Shakar!"

The commander of troops came swiftly. "Your majesty?"

"Throw this thing," said El Stephen, "into a tight dungeon and post a double guard over him. Under no condition let him talk to you."

"You can't do this to me!" wailed Bolton, groveling. "I'll do anything! I'll—"

"Take him away," said El Stephen in disgust.

A little later Tedmur came back and was shocked to find El Stephen's knuckles bloody. "What have you done?" she cried in great concern.

"Be calm. Our visitor has decided not to stay."

"But I saw them putting him into a dungeon."

"He'll be gone in a day or two," said El Stephen. "And then I can rest easy." He smiled as he sucked his knuckle.

"You are happy, my master?" she said, eyes adoringly upon him.

"I am happy, my queen," said El Stephen.

"I am content."

THE END.

YOU THOUGHT ME DEAD

BY WILLIAM C. BOGART

YOU THOUGHT ME DEAD

By William G. Bogart

STRANGELY, tonight I do not feel alone at all. At first, of course, I had thought it would be like that. Especially when the night came. When darkness settled over the musty old house and that damnable wind whined through the bare elms, chattering the dead leaves. It was even raining, and the sound was like invisible hands clamoring at the curtained windows.

Yet none of this bothered me in the least. I rather liked it, Martha. And I imagine this surprises you, doesn't it? You had thought—I could tell it right at the last—that I would be haunted, cringing away from every slightest sound with terror. Listening for steps would come up on the porch and scrape across that one loose board. And then the knock, the awful knock on the door with the echo trailing through the empty house and banging off the walls.

Well, none of that bothered me. For I was free. After all these years of torture, and doubt, and suspicion, I was free to do as I please.

No one knew, naturally. I had been too careful for that. No one would come looking for me—or for you, either—for days, perhaps months. So I could just stay on there at the house and do as I chose, alone, unhampered, not listening to your confounded bickering. That constant reminder of my—well, of *it*.

Right there near the last you had screamed: "You'll suffer for this, Daniel. You'll suffer hell on earth! I'll be with you every moment, terrifying you, damning you, pointing a finger at you. *And they'll know!*"

The rest I forget. Perhaps that has helped, too. Those very last moments, those moments that must have been terribly horrible, are a blank. So you see there is nothing to bother me now; no slightest picture of any of it. I can sit here and laugh; I can listen to the soughing of the wind and the whispering of the rain outside the windows and laugh.

Because I am free. I could, perhaps, stay here for weeks and enjoy that freedom. But I think I'll go away, travel awhile. There's always the possibility of that scrawny, snooping sister of yours—Clara—coming around and asking questions. Besides, I've got the money. At least, enough for five years to spend for everything I want. But especially to travel. I've always wanted to do that.

Yes, I know what you're thinking. They won't speak to me; I'll travel always alone, and they'll cringe away from me in horror because of *it!* Well, let them! Do I have to care what they do? I tell you I've got enough to go where I want, buy what I want, do what I want. To hell with them. It's just what I've been seeking all this time. Don't you understand—no one will *bother* me, Martha!

So I'm going—

THE FIRST TIME I met him he was on the same train. It was the Century to Chicago, and both of us had stayed up late. I was on the way to the coast, to Hollywood—one of the places I had always wanted to see. Remember how I used to talk about that, Martha? Well, I'm getting a laugh out of it now. I'm seeing it without you, and you were the one who always said

we couldn't afford it! But, of course, you didn't know about the money and now I have been able to go alone.

Alone, understand? The way I've always wanted it. While you—

He was a frightful-looking individual. At first, I hadn't noticed. He had been sitting there across the aisle reading a newspaper, his white head buried in the newsprint. I do remember once, though, when a young woman came down the aisle, stopped, holding to the Pullman seat against the swaying of the car, and started to ask him if he'd seen the porter. And when he started to look up, her hand flew to her mouth and she stifled a half-scream. She literally flew down the aisle and out of the car. She must have stayed in the ladies' parlor the remainder of the night.

His face was rather hideous, my dear. Like it might have been burned by oil sometime years ago. There was hardly enough flesh to hold over the bones, and the eyes seemed to be the only things alive about it. The forehead, the nose that was partially missing, even the lips were like dead things. But the eyes were black and deep and peculiar.

I looked over at him when the woman ran away, and I smiled.

"Good evening," I said pleasantly.

He growled something and stuck his hideous face back in the paper. And then, as though surprised that anyone should *want* to speak to him, he jerked his dark gaze my way an instant. It was just a fleeting glance, and for the first time I noticed something about him. His gaze seemed to keep jerking back and forth like a man reading a column of newsprint. Only he wasn't reading, but—watching. Constantly on the alert for something that did not seem to be there.

I tried again. "Dull, isn't it, after everyone retires?"

This time he looked at me a full moment. His eyes changed, as though he might be trying to smile. Only he wasn't. At least, his face wasn't. It was that same set, hideous stare like dead flesh over an aged skeleton. He was old—at least, old-looking. His body was gaunt and long and bony, the hands like long talons with little flesh. And they kept working nervously at the edges of the paper as he looked at me.

However, I stood up, moved across the aisle and said, "Do you mind?"

Without waiting for a reply, I sat down in the wide seat with him. He seemed to cringe slightly away from me at first; and then, like a curious animal that slowly learns the reaching hand is not going to hurt him, he relaxed.

We talked. We talked of many things, but mainly about what travel did for a man. Oddly, he had the same ideas as my own. He was going to visit the main ports of the world, something he had always wanted to do. He was even going first to Los Angeles, and I suggested that we might meet again there. But at the remark he changed the subject.

Later—it must have been all of two hours—I got sleepy. Terribly so. I made apologies and told him I guessed I'd turn in.

And he seemed disappointed. "This is fine," he said quickly. "I like it, this talk of ours. Stay up awhile. It's been so long since I've talked to a man like this."

I wanted to, but my eyes wouldn't stay open. I made apologies again and called the porter to make up my berth, across the aisle. And oddly, the hideous-faced stranger seemed upset about being left alone. He was like a person afraid to be alone.

And here I was enjoying it, outside of a pleasant two hours spent with him in conversation. But now I was ready to be alone again, Martha. Like I wanted it these long years—

LATER in the night—it must have been close to dawn, because we were

passing slowly through a little town and milk cans were rattling on the station platform—there was suddenly in the still Pullman car the horrible scream. It was a cry that came and ended abruptly, but intense enough to bring me and others instantly awake.

I lay there listening, trying to figure its source, when I suddenly heard the movements in the berth directly across the aisle. I stuck my head out of the green curtains, listening, and heard the other sound. It was like a frightened whimpering, and there was movement in the stranger's berth behind his drawn curtains.

And as suddenly those curtains parted and the terribly scarred-faced man came out into the aisle, fully dressed, a valise in his hand. I saw that peculiar jerking of his black eyes from side to side again, and his whole body, his tall, gaunt body, was shaking as with palsy.

Sobbing something that sounded like, "Damn you—get away from me!" he ran stumbling down the aisle. I knew then that he was absolutely terrified about something. An instant later I was out of the berth and in a robe, following.

But I was too late. I knew I was too late when I heard the clanging opening of the vestibule door and step platform. The train was still moving, perhaps slowly, it seemed, and yet it must have been over twenty miles an hour. But when I got out there in the vestibule, along with the porter now and other awakened passengers, he was gone. He had jumped—

BUT I MET the strange gaunt man again. In Honolulu. Three months later. It was in a bar out near Pearl Harbor, a place where you could sit and drink yourself to death and no one paid the slightest attention. That's what he had been doing; drinking, and overdoing it.

He was thinner now, if that were possible, like a long bag of bones in a white linen suit. He was seated there at a table, alone, and the bottle was half empty before him. There were some sailors from the submarine base in there, too, but I don't imagine anyone wanted to talk to *him*. It was because of his face, the terribly sickening face. But oddly, I didn't mind.

I walked over to his table and said cheerfully: "Well, hello there. We meet again!"

But he didn't even look up.

He was sitting there staring off into space, and when I saw his eyes closely, it was really quite disturbing. Bleak, and bloodshot, and sort of wild. Like he'd been looking at something awful for a long time and couldn't pull away his gaze.

I spoke again and still he didn't answer.

Funny, I thought. What was wrong with the man?

He reached out for the bottle, and when he poured himself a drink his hand was trembling. I noticed something else. That night in the car he had been immaculately dressed and neat. But now his fingernails were dirty and the linen suit needed pressing badly. Even though he was shaved, he still looked unkempt.

I touched his arm and offered: "Look, I thought you and I were friends? How about telling me about it?" I indicated the bottle, vaguely waved my hand to his sloppy clothing.

He seemed to jerk out of a stupor and stare across the table. But oddly not *at* me. He just stared as though there might be someone else there to the rear of me, and he started to shake. A single word escaped those awful scarred lips of his. It sounded like, "No!"

I quickly put in: "Now look, friend, you really ought to remember me, you know. I was the fellow in the Pullman car—"

But he was still staring and mum-

bling something and seeming to address someone beyond me. You could tell from his eyes. Awe-stricken, I listened.

"Damn you!" he was saying guttural-ly. "I thought I got rid of you? Go away! You . . . you're *dead,* understand? You can't haunt me now. Go away before I—"

And he came half up out of his chair, his voice rising, the whiskey bottle clutched in his bony hand.

A sailor at the bar laughed and said: "Look at Pop, will you? He ought to lay off that hard liquor down here where it's hot. It gets them all."

PERHAPS the man across the table from me heard them, though his staring black eyes said that he was still in communion with this mythical person to whom he seemed to be talking. He broke off in his terrified babbling, sank back weakly into the chair and downed another drink. He appeared to get some control of himself.

I said, "Well, maybe you'll talk to me now." I touched his arm gently again.

And that face of his, that gruesomely scarred face, suddenly jerked my way. Not that his hideous face could show expression, but his eyes could. And they were bulging, terrified. Yet he said nothing, showed no signs of recognition even yet.

But he did reach out a shaking hand and touch me. And even that didn't seem to convince him. For he pulled the hand back, stared at it, and then rubbed it across his eyes. He gave a long, sighing shiver and started to mumble again.

It was about then that the tall young man with the quick, alert step came in. Or perhaps he had been there all the time and I hadn't noticed. Anyway, he seemed to have spotted my friend and he came over to the table.

The young man's eyes were bright, calculating, and there was something about him that you recognized. He was a detective.

He said: "All right, Barton. I guess this ends the trail. You've been pretty clever, I'll hand you that."

And my friend jerked to his feet, quivering, and tried to beat at the detective's chest, screaming: "No . . . no . . . no! *She* can't do this to me, damn her! I'll—"

But the husky young man had snapped handcuffs on my friend now and was half dragging him out to a waiting car. I quickly followed—I didn't go past the bar, and I guess you know why, eh, Martha?—but even as I went I caught the words of some sailor standing there.

"Imagine that?" he was exclaiming. "A murderer, they say!"

"Well, you never can tell," another replied.

And a third: "God, that face!"

I caught up with them at the car door. I stood there gripping the car door with one hand and jerking at the young detective's sleeve with my arm. "Now look here," I said. "There must be something wrong. I want to help him. He's a friend of mine, see, and I—"

But that young whelp of a detective didn't even notice me. He was handing his prisoner over to another, heavier man in the rear seat. The young man got behind the wheel of the open-model touring car. I called to my friend, "Look, old boy, I'll follow along and try to help you!"

But he didn't even answer. None of them looked at me, and that was strange. The car kicked up dust on the shore road and went away from there.

But just before it turned a bend in the road, my gray-haired friend twisted around in the seat and looked back. It was that same awful-looking face, and the expression of terror lingered in my mind. Of course, I couldn't see the eyes at that distance, but I heard the scream as he looked back. A shrill yell of stark terror. And then they were gone—

WELL, I followed. Across the Pacific and by plane back to New York. And thence up to the crowded little courtroom in Vermont. Plans for my own sightseeing had been abandoned, for curiously, interest in my scarred-faced friend's fate had become more important to me than anything else in the world.

They must have caught a Clipper plane back to California, because by the time I got there to that sleepy little Vermont village the trial had already started. A jury had been picked, and the day I slipped into the stuffy courtroom they had witnesses on the stand.

He was there, too, my gaunt-framed friend, and he was seated at a table with his lawyer. His head was in hands, but he did a curious thing when I slipped into the room and quietly took an aisle seat. He raised his head and looked around, appeared to stare directly at me! And that terrified, intense glare was still there in his dark eyes. I couldn't figure it out.

The prosecuting attorney had called a man to the stand. A man dressed in workman's clothes and with a cap in his hand, an old-looking cap which he kept constantly twisting. It seemed that he had worked there about the village for years, and was well known and dependable, a stolid sort of person who was apparently trustworthy. After the preliminary questioning they got around to the part about the night which concerned my friend.

I had nudged a woman next to me, to ask, "What's it all about?"

But I guess she was too interested in what was going on, for she never bothered to answer, or even look at me. But I soon figured it out, anyway, for from the questions it was evident that they thought my friend had killed his wife.

The prosecuting attorney was saying, "And you claim that she was sobbing?"

The stolid-looking workman twisted his cap and nodded. "That's what made me stop. I was out for a walk, and it had been raining. Only it had stopped now and the air was nice. I was going by their place there, down by the Valley Road, and I heard voices arguing and then this woman started crying. So I stopped."

"What did you do then?"

"Well, I thought I'd just take a look. I didn't know them people, and generally it was pretty quiet down there whenever you passed. But it wasn't that night and—"

"What time was it?"

"I guess about twelve o'clock, and that's what made me curious. Other times the place was always dark at that time of night."

"And?"

"So I heard her crying and went through the gate—it was open—and walked across the lawn. That place is well back from the road and I knew it must be something pretty bad, otherwise you couldn't hear anyone back in there. I reached an open window and there they were in the parlor."

"They? Who?"

"Why, him and her." The witness looked down from the witness chair and at my gaunt white-haired friend at the long table. "Him and his wife."

THE WORKMAN only looked a half second at the defendant. He took only one look at my friend's face and shuddered. Then he resumed talking.

"I guess they had been arguing, and in the man's hands there was the remains of a broken mirror; that is, only the handle was left. He was waving the broken part in his wife's face and yelling: 'Damn you, you've always hated me, haven't you? Because of this!' And he was indicating his awful face. And then he said something that I didn't catch, but she backed away from him and threw up her hands, and she cried: 'No! No, Daniel. You'll never

get away with it!'"

The workman's eyes were wide now and he had stopped twisting his cap.

The lawyer questioning him said: "Yes? And then? Tell it just like you saw it, Hendricks."

The witness went on: "Well, it happened so fast and it was awful. He"—pointing at my friend—"grabbed her throat and started shaking her, and all the time he was yelling about his face and how she hated him for something he couldn't help. After a while he let up a little, and she screamed in awful terror: 'You'll suffer for this, Daniel. You'll suffer hell on earth! I'll be with you every moment, terrifying you, damning you, pointing a finger at you. *And they'll know!*'

"She said that, sir, and more, and this guy here must have been insane, I guess. Because he started staring real funny and laughing some more. And then the other woman came in."

"Who?" the lawyer asked. "Is she here in this courtroom?"

The workman nodded, pointing to a thin, pale-faced woman seated stiffly within the rail before the spectators in the crowded courtroom. "Her," he indicated.

I looked, and something jerked inside of me. It was that old devil, Clara! She was seated there, that damned hawk-like face of hers white and her stringy hair tied in a knot at the back of her head, the way she always wears it. And she was appearing against my friend, apparently, for she jerked to her feet and cried, "Yes, I was there!" She pointed a long thin finger at my white-haired friend at the table and half screamed, "*He* killed her! He—"

The judge rapped for silence and the workman continued: "Well, Mr. lawyer, she came in and yelled at the woman's husband and he let go of his wife and grabbed her instead. The guy was completely daffy now, you could tell. He grabbed this other woman and dragged her toward a closet across the room. She was yelling after he locked her in the closet. So he opened it again, dragged her out, and then hit her and threw her back into the closet. She didn't make any more noise after that."

"Yes? Then what?"

"He came back after his wife. She tried to get away from him and he grabbed her. And then—" The witness paused.

"Yes?"

The workman looked suddenly sheepish, said in a low voice: "Well, I went away from there. I figured it was a private fight and none of my business. I've never mixed up in that kind of trouble and I didn't want to start. So I went away. And later, I . . . I heard that—"

The lawyer prompted, "You heard that she was dead?"

"Yes, it was in the paper. About her sister being found there in the closet and the husband missing. And later they found *her!*"

The lawyer nodded. "Yes, they found her when her sister told the authorities. All right, Hendricks; that's all." He turned and looked at the woman. "Will Clara Edwards please take the stand?"

I STARTED to my feet, yelling something. That damned old hellcat, Clara, wasn't fit to appear against *anybody*. She was a witch, and I knew she'd lie her head off—

But no one paid any attention to me. The judge rapped on his desk and said something about court being adjourned to the following morning, when Clara would then take the stand, and everyone started leaving, all talking at once.

I pushed through the crowd—no one seemed interested in me anyhow—and got up there inside the rail where that scrawny-looking Clara was sitting. I started to curse her, and tell her that anything she said would be a pack of lies, anyway.

But she wouldn't look at me, though she shifted around in the chair sort of scaredlike, and suddenly her eyes were popping and she was on her feet. The judge was halfway out of the room, and she called after him, running up to him and clutching his arm. I heard her say, "Your honor, there's something—"

She shot a glance over her shoulder, as though looking at someone. She was terrified.

"Yes?" the judge asked.

"I . . . I'm afraid!" Clara blurted. "It's something I can't explain. Only . . . please . . . I want someone for a bodyguard. Please, your honor, send someone home with me—until after I appear tomorrow!"

At first, I guess, he wasn't going to do it, figuring that in a small Vermont town like that there wouldn't be anyone wanting to hurt her, anyway. But then he watched her face, her wild eyes, the way she was trembling. So he shrugged and said, "Well, I guess I can."

I went out of there—

I WAS BACK in the musty old house without remembering how I got there. I had sworn that I never would return. But now that I was here I remembered it all distinctly; that is, all except the last few moments when I had actually killed her. I couldn't remember what I had done with the body, but now it came back to me. I remembered that I had buried her down there in the garden behind the tool shed.

It was night, so I got a light and went down there. And got a shock. For the grave had been dug up, and there were the prints of many feet around the spot. They had found her.

Frightened, I returned to the house. For the first time I recalled that I hadn't shaved, and it wouldn't do to let myself get careless. Someone might mistake me for a vagrant and ask questions, or—

I went up to the bathroom and got out some shaving things. And couldn't locate the mirror. I went downstairs in the kitchen and looked, and then up to *her* room. There had been one there, only now it was broken. I managed to find a piece that had slid beneath the bed. I got it and took it back to the bathroom.

Lights in the house had been switched off, and I was using the light, the lantern. I propped the mirror fragment up on a shelf, got the light fixed beside it and took a look at my rough face.

I guess I screamed. It was the most hideous face I had ever seen. I ran out of the house trembling and weak, and I guess I ran along the deserted road in the darkness for all of a mile. There was an old deserted summerhouse down there a piece, and later—it must have been near dawn—I crawled up in a corner and fell off to sleep—

I WAS still scared the next morning. I tried to forget the face and avoided everyone I could until it was time for the trial to resume. But things were coming back to me now. I passed old Ned Winthrop, the city clerk, on Main Street and spoke to him. But he just kept right on going and didn't say a word.

It was the same with others I met. Thomas, the grocer; Nancy Dale from the library—that talkative old maid who knows every bit of scandal in town. I stopped them all and tried to tell them about my white-haired friend. Lord, *he* hadn't killed Martha. It was *I!* Only they wouldn't stop to talk to me, or listen, or do anything. Good heavens, they didn't even *see* me!

In the courtroom, later, there was excitement. It seemed something had happened to that devil Clara. I heard them talking about it. They had found her choked to death in her bed at the town's only hotel, where she had been staying because she was afraid. It seems the guard knocked on her room door when it started to get late, because he knew

they would be late for the trial, and then he had gone in and found Clara choked to death there in her bed. With no signs, no clues to the one who did it. It was baffling, they were saying in the courtroom corridors.

And it set me to wondering about last night, when I had thought I was asleep there in the empty summer bungalow along the River Road—

Well, they were also saying that perhaps now my white-haired friend would escape the chair, because Clara had been the only one who actually *knew* about the murder. The workman, of course, knew it had been murder—later—but he had not actually *seen*.

It seems Clara had come to for a while there in the parlor closet and had watched through the keyhole, screaming and battering her fists on the door, as her sister was choked to death. Later, she had fainted, or become unconscious again from that blow on the head; and so they had not found her until two days later. A passing milkman had heard her screams—

I WAS MOVING in and out of the crowds now, hearing all those things and grabbing the arms of people I knew and trying to shout to them that my friend had not done it. It was I, I tried to tell them.

But they would not listen. They would not even speak to me. They acted like I was not even there at all.

And so the trial continued, with my friend there in the chair, my friend who, I now knew, was an *exact* counterpart of myself. Hideous face and all. He explained about the accident that had made his face so terrible, and of the way his wife had shunned him all those years. But he would not admit to murder, and I felt sorry for him. They were intent on sending him to the chair and I was sorry for him.

So I pushed my way down to the front of the room, screaming at the judge and all those others there, trying to tell them that it was I who had choked Martha to death. And still none of them would look at me, or listen, or do anything at all. But my white-haired friend did. He stood up in the witness box, suddenly wide-eyed, pointing a finger at me and babbling terrified oaths. And then he told them. Told them the whole gruesome business just as *I* really had done it. I remembered it all now, even the part about Clara coming into the parlor, though I guessed I had not known about it at the time. I recall little about those few moments.

But here my friend was admitting the whole thing, blabbering about how Martha was haunting him and driving him insane. He cried out that it would be better to confess to everything and be rid of her—for that is what he wanted.

And so they—the court—sent him to the chair.

But I was there, right there in the death house, the night they killed him. I was there trying to talk to them—the reporters, their nerves fortified with whiskey; a psychologist whose face was white as a sheet; a sob sister from some tabloid who fainted and who was left slumped in her chair because the warden had said that no one, *no one*, would leave the room once the condemned man was brought in.

My friend came stumbling in between two guards. The warden and a priest followed. A prayer was being mumbled softly, and there were the slits in my friend's trouser legs and his shaved head and the awful, rigid silence. Before they had brought him in, though, the warden had stepped inside to announce:

"Remember, everyone—no matter what the condemned man says, no matter what outburst he makes, no one shall answer him!"

Another man had stepped into a small anteroom with a glass window. He was

the one who pulled the switch.

I shouted at them, screamed, tried to tell them. And still no one would pay any attention to me.

There was shortly the sickening sound of the current passing through my friend's body, and the frantic surge he gave against the straps, pitching toward the left as the voltage struck his heart.

ODDLY, I lived through every ageless second of that excruciating horror; felt every nerve being burned and ripped from my body. At the very second the power was turned on, *I* was there in the chair. And then it passed, and I was somewhere beyond, apparently still in the room yet apart from the others. I was still there watching.

They took my friend out to a small adjoining room and a doctor pronounced him dead. I again tried to tell them. Here I was, watching it all, watching him die—and no one would listen to my appeals to save him. It was too late.

I even went to the dismal little funeral, as they carried him in a cheap pine box up a bleak hillside near the prison and buried him in a solitary grave. There they were, stony-faced grave-diggers shoveling the dirt on top of the man who looked exactly like me—while I was watching and still trying to tell them that I did it and should be the one there in the grave.

And still they would not listen.

The sun had gone down that night and I was still sitting there by the grave, alone and utterly weary now. I had watched them go back to the prison, leaving me there in the night.

Just the new grave and me and black night falling. And then, suddenly, I understood. I know now what has happened.

That poor devil there in the grave is part of *me*—another part of me. A second half of me that was something terrible and deadly. Another person that killed and hated and lied. A creature that looked like and talked like me, a hideous beast that should have been killed long ago.

Oddly, now, I do not feel sorry about his death. For it has seemed to lift from my mind some awful weight. Even you, Martha, are no longer trying to haunt me, accuse me. There is nothing at all left now.

That part of me that was a murderer is dead forever. It is getting dark, also, and it is quite terrible.

What shall I do now? There is nothing left—nothing! I am not dead! Dear God, no, I can't be dead!

And yet I know—somehow—that it is true. That other part of me has also died for the wicked part that was he.

I—

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THE CHANGELING

BY ARTHUR J. BURKS

THE CHANGELING

By Arthur J. Burks

Old gods die—and new gods are born —but Cideus, the new butcher-god—

NOW the Greeks say that the gods were, and created men in their images; and the priests of the Greeks spread this word and taught men to worship at the shrines of the gods. But it was the priests who described these gods, and told men of them, and that men were created in the images of the gods, so it is plain that the gods were created by men in the images of men, in fact.

And this was the reason thereof: No man is wholly as he would be, possessing all of any character he would desire, and each man has his own ideal of the perfect character. To some it is the bluff, stanch courage, the pure, fine joy of striving and achievement, battle against odds. And these are the men who, worshiping that character, created Mars, not in their image, but in the image they would have by choice.

And some there are who worship pure, cool knowledge, serene and aloof, the beauty and strength of truth. And these worshiped and created Minerva, goddess of wisdom.

So for each of the things men would be, there was a god, for there were worshipers of that thing. And the gods were as immortal as those strong desires in the generations of man; as those desires rise and glow in the recurring waves of mankind, so the gods went on forever, eternal as those tides.

But not eternal wholly; neither wholly undying, nor wholly unborn. Some gods died, as the spirit that made them died out in men. So perished Bacchus with the vanishment of the communal gathering of grapes and pressing of wine and the festival that went therewith. Grumbling, lame-legged Vulcan, god of the workshops and foundries, twisted his leather apron higher, muttered, and took over efficiently the work of Bacchus, and lost, somehow, the sparkled joy that Bacchus had found in the task.

So gods die; and thus are others born.

As mortals became more wise under the tutelage of Minerva, they lost another strange, warm flame of joy—the joy of strife and direct pitting of man against man. They lost the spirit of competitiveness in war, and sought only the distilled essence of the thing—victory—and cared not how they won it. And the emanation of that was a new god, fathered by Mars, the warrior, mothered—perhaps reluctantly—by Minerva, the wise.

From Mars, the bluff, strong warrior, who, for all his savagery, met his enemies face to face, he inherited his knowledge of war. From Minerva, a new wisdom with which to wage it. And the combination was unhappy, the bitter second-generation weakling sometimes produced by two fine parents, and in the places of the gods was Cideus, the killer, the new god worshiped by mortals in new temples, vast crawling temples buried beneath the borders of the Rhine, half hidden on rocky hillsides

overlooking valleys, and mighty floating temples of thick steel.

I.

"HIS ROYAL Highness, Cideus!" cried the herald.

Cideus pushed past the herald, slamming him against the wall without apparently noticing what he did; but knowing even as he did it that not a bit of the byplay would be missed by those he was facing. He did not intend that it be missed. They, like the mortals whom he served, whose god he was, might as well know that Cideus was not one with whom even the gods might trifle.

Cideus looked about him. His grandfather sat at the head of the table, sad disapproval on his face as he lifted his head to stare at his grandson. There had been a time when the old one could frighten Cideus with those eyes of his; when the grandfather's thunderbolts had been hurled eternally through his nightmares, and he had suffered agonies of terror because of them. That applied no longer. Always, until lately, Cideus had bowed the knee and bent the head to his grandfather. Now he merely met the old man's eyes, felt no qualms of fear, and waited.

The old one spoke: "I suppose even his grandfather has no right to expect ordinary respect from Cideus!"

"That, your majesty," said Cideus coolly, "is a grand way to win me from whatever of my ways of living you disapprove of! I don't mind lip-service, even a show of reverence, if I may elect to offer them myself, without imperial hints. But suggest that I *have* to do a thing, and I am likely to rebel!"

He turned away without bowing the head or bending the knee, knowing full well that he might as well have struck his grandfather across the face with a mailed fist. He heard the old one gasp, but did not turn back, nor feel the slightest qualm of conscience. It was probable that he had no conscience.

"Impudent, insufferable young whelp!"

No doubting whence *those* words came! From the father of Cideus, between whom and Cideus was a constantly widening breach that might never be closed this side of eternity. Cideus looked at his father, and his lip twisted a little. He almost erupted into hot words. How dared that old one criticize him, Cideus! It was the jealousy of a has-been for the go-getter—the successful one who would not be stopped.

His mother sat at the other end of the table. Somehow he couldn't curl his lip at her, though her face—beautiful, he had to admit, beyond the face of any mortal he'd ever seen—was as long as that of his grandfather. She felt sad, too. Yes, and she was blaming him for her sadness—for everybody's sadness. He owed her something, of course, for from her vast wisdom she had endowed him with all the attributes which made for his headlong, sanguine success. Yet he knew she wouldn't have done so, had she realized what use he was going to make of them. For that reason, perhaps, he gave her credit that was not due her. He bowed to her. He even removed his helmet, bent his knee, so that she could bless him if she were so inclined. But he didn't mind when she said nothing, but sat as stiffly erect as though carved from travertine. He stepped back, looked at the other member of the conference—

There were so few of the family left, because need for them had vanished with the evolution of mortals. But this other member had his place, a rather important one. Even Cideus had to admit that, grudgingly, for this other member supervised the work of gods and mortals. His name was Vulcan. Cideus met the eyes of the Lame One, and received such a look of hatred that he was almost startled—if he had not become so

accustomed to hatred.

"My dearest friend!" said Cideus, unmistakable irony in his voice. He produced a cigarette with a flourish, and struck a light.

"Drop it!" came from the head of the table. "How dare you? Not since the dawn of time has a member of this family dared bring even the smallest vice of mortals into the sacred confines of the palace!"

"Stop it, Cideus!" said Mars. "Stop it, sir, or even though you are my son —I grind my teeth at thought that this is so!—I shall break you apart!"

"Cideus, *please!*" said Minerva. "Why must you, deliberately, go out of your way to give offense, when so much is at stake!"

"Don't get excited, Grandfather Jove!" said Cideus, grinning. "And I wouldn't try to carry out that threat if I were you, Father Mars! As for you, mother, don't stew so much. I've outgrown your apron strings!"

With every word, with every sneer, with every breaking of precedent, Cideus made it plain to them all—as he intended—that something grim, horrible, iconoclastic, had come through the door with him, to the conference of the gods. He, Cideus, was horror, bloodshed, savagery beyond conception, a pragmatist without reverence or compunction—and they might as well know it first as last. In front of all their faces he disposed of the cigarette, in a way that was more sacrilegious than if he had failed to dispose of it: he ground it out atop the ancient cypress table.

Then he stepped back. He had set a key; they need not expect to win him to any other course of conduct by appeals to "we have always done" and pure sentiment. Cideus was a pragmatist; what worked was good.

"I'll listen to whatever you have to say," he said flatly. "I sincerely hope it is important, though frankly and in advance, I doubt it!"

The conference of the gods was in session.

II.

JOVE, the All-Father, sat at the head of the table, still with that sad look on his face—as though he could not quite, for all his knowledge, understand how this changeling Cideus had been born into the celestial family. There had been a mistake somewhere. Something had gone wrong. The heritage of Cideus was of the best. Mars and Minerva, the latter his own daughter—*directly* his own daughter, as against the fact that he was father of all—gods and mortals alike. Grandson of Jove himself. Jove searched his own soul, trying to find wherein he merited Cideus for a grandson. There were some things about the grandson he did not know, or pretended he did not know. He knew now it was because he had closed his eyes and his ears to what went on—to the doings of Cideus. Now he must face it, and he faced it with dread. The very fact that dread grew in him filled him with ungodlike terror.

Never before had he actually known terror. Why should he feel it now? People were afraid for just one reason: fear of extinction, though they might not realize that that was the basis of their fear. But Jove knew, because he knew all there was to know. Jove was intelligence. He glaced at his grandson, met the sneer on the face of Cideus—and did not bring forth a thunderbolt with which to destroy him. Why did he not? He knew why, and that was part of the terror. The thunderbolt would have no effect, because he had delayed too long. He sighed—and wished that he could simply disappear into nothingness, never have to face what he sensed that this would be: a conference in which the gods must fight for their very existence, against the youngest member of the family.

"Cideus is here," Jove heard himself saying, when he would have preferred to delay the fatal opening to the end of time. "We sent for him. He has some question to answer, some explanations to make. We sit in judgment on him. I prefer not to be the one to ask the first question of this changeling grandson of mine."

He noted the nervous fluttering of the white hands of Minerva, and his fear became greater. Minerva had never been afraid of anything, never doubted herself, lacked confidence. Yet now her hands fluttered nervously, and her eyes lacked assurance. Those white hands were a dreadful signal in the palace of the gods—for they showed that Minerva, like Jove, feared that the worst would come. They even showed that if something were not done Minerva might explode into dreadful hysteria—something that no goddess within Jove's memory had done.

Hurriedly, Jove added: "You question him first, my daughter. After all, some of the responsibility for what he has become must be laid at your door!"

Even as Jove accused his daughter he knew he had made a mistake. He was just as much to blame as she was. And perhaps none of them was to blame. Perhaps—but he would never admit it aloud—Cideus had his proper place in the scheme of things. If there had not been *some* reason for his birth into the household of the gods, he would not have come into being. Did Jove no longer understand the place of gods in the lives of mortals? If he did not, he was weaker by that much; and when a god showed weakness, by just so much was he headed for the end.

Minerva was on the horns of a dilemma, because she loved her son—because she had loved him too much, right up to the time when the whole heavenly family realized that something horrible had been born into the household—

"Father Jove," she said, and even Cideus, who believed in nothing beautiful, who was the greatest cynic ever conceived mortally or of the gods, felt a stir within him at the melody in her voice—though the melody was freighted with the family sorrow. "Perhaps I am to blame. If I am I glady offer myself for punishment, if my son be allowed to escape it!"

"The martyrdom of motherhood!" thought Cideus, failing to say it aloud solely because Minerva went on speaking. *"She's dramatizing herself to the skies, like mortal mothers when my wings have passed over their homes and accidentally disposed of some of their brats!"*

"THOU KNOWEST," said Minerva, "how much I have loved him—and spoiled him. Of my vast wisdom, offspring of your intelligence, Father Jove. I have denied him nothing. Into his brain I have poured all knowledge, as soon as I felt he was ready for it."

"Better for all of us," interrupted Mars savagely, "if you had strangled him! It was a sad day for us all when none of us realized what had been born into the household!"

"Like to try the strangling business now yourself, Father Mars?" said Cideus, grinning. "I'm sure that with all your equipment and experience you could erase me with a breath! One of *your* breaths, especially, since your roaring is like the wind—and far more nearly empty!"

Cideus almost felt sorry for his father, whose face went so white at his words.

"Some of the blame," said Minerva hastily, before there could be an open rupture, "must be placed at the door of his father. Ever since Cideus was little, his father roared at him like that! Cideus grew up with the roaring of Mars in his ears. It is little wonder then that the roaring, the combativeness, of his father, turned his mind to war—"

"Combativeness?" repeated Mars, jumping to his feet, and smashing his huge fist hard against the table top. "There is nothing honestly combative about Cideus! He doesn't meet his enemies face to face; he waits for them in the dark! He stabs them in the back. I never heard of the kind of war he makes, and I won't stand for—"

"Silence, sir!" said Jove. "You'll have your say at the proper time. At the moment Minerva is talking!"

"And talking—and talking—and talking—" said Mars. "What's the good of talking? There's nothing here that can bet settled with words. Give this snakish son of mine to me to deal with in the way I know best! There's only one way to handle such a one—and who could know it better than I? Give him to me, when judgment is passed!"

"I already belong to you," said Cideus quietly, "and I don't see that you've done much to change me—except further and further from your own ideas of the proper conduct. And why? Because I could never believe in them! What's the good of facing an adversary who, even though he may not be your equal in strength, still has *some* strength, and is therefore capable of doing you some harm? Of scarring your face, or breaking a few bones, or at least of tiring you? Approach him from the rear and stab him between the shoulder blades, and he doesn't do you any harm at all!" Cideus could not fully understand the expression of shock he saw on the faces of all. He believed exactly what he had said; it was logic, and he was right.

Mars glared at him—

"Mars, my father," thought Cideus, *"knows I mean not only what I say, but a lot I haven't said. He knows that when I speak of thus destroying one adversary, I think in terms of thousands, of millions. And he will stop me if he can. My own father is my most dangerous enemy at this conference, though I doubt if he or any of them can do me any real harm, personally! My influence with mortals is far too strong, I think, while theirs is waning."*

VULCAN interrupted. He did it hesitantly, as one not accustomed to making speeches. He expressed himself best with the tools of labor, and the more complex the tools, the better he expressed himself. It had been with difficulty that he had been brought to the conference at all. It was near impossible to tear him from his labors—the results of which, and the manifestation of which, were scattered throughout the realms of all mortals.

"Perhaps I can bring some system to this discussion," he said. "To me the issue seems simple enough. I see it, of course, from the viewpoint of my own work—to which this Cideus has done and is doing incalculable harm—inciting mortals to even greater harm. In the end my temples of labor, if Cideus has his way—"

"This conference is out of hand before it starts," said Jove. "We all have purposes to serve, but each must be heard in his turn. Minerva, you may continue."

"When," she said, her voice and body shaking, proof that she had held onto her self-control through the squabbling with all her will power. "I poured into the brain of my son all the wisdom of the ages, so that he became as wise as the wisest of the gods. I gave him, by implication, the right to use that wisdom as he saw fit. If I expected it to be manifested as mortals have manifested their appreciation of *my* wisdom—in the building of temple colleges and universities—I am to blame that I did not assure myself that it would be so manifested, not perverted to something else, something blasphemous. My intention was that his wisdom, as mine has been, be devoted to the enlightenment of all mortals. I'm afraid I took for granted that it would be. So I erred—"

"No, mother," said Cideus, "only in application! Mortals *are* wiser because of me—or their wisdom has influenced me to my destiny. Nothing has been done to erase ambition, the strife for more and so the wisdom you poured into my brain has been used to—"

"Horror—fratricide—matricide — infanticide!" said Mars. "Even the gods have not the words to express the horror Cideus has loosed, by perverting the knowledge his mother gave him!"

"Fathers, mothers and infants who are slain by my methods, Father Mars," said Cideus, "hasten decisions in war! By your method there was almost never a decision—certainly never a lasting one. Don't you know, my blustering father, that only ninety-nine years out of the last two thousand have been free of war?"

"Cideus," said Jove, waving a hand to Mars, who was on the point of erupting into direct action against his son, "we ask little of you, knowing there is little use. But could you, realizing that we are sitting in judgment on you, defer your sneering remarks until it is your turn to talk?"

Cideus shrugged, and his shrug was insult. The face of Jove went white, and divine fury looked out of his eyes. But he realized that if he gave way to his anger he would be doing exactly as his grandson, goading him, desired. The fury left his eyes, the whiteness his cheeks.

"Minerva, please," said Jove.

"If in the exercise of the wisdom I gave him, he *has* departed from the example of his roaring lion father, then it is because the time has come, in the history of this illustrious family, when such departure is indicated. I am his champion, whatever he does!"

But even as Minerva spoke she was thinking—and her thoughts were widely at variance with her spoken words. For with her words to Mars, and Vulcan, and Jove, she had tried her best to hide her thoughts—because her thoughts would have gone far to condemn her son to whatever punishment the gods might elect to administer.

III.

MARS, without waiting for permission, jumped to his feet the instant Minerva finished. His position, really, was the one most surely menaced by Cideus, because Cideus was taking his place as god of war without so much as by-your-leave—as he had taken many other things, including the lives of millions of mortals.

"Minerva doesn't believe a word she has said!" roared Mars. "She has taken leave of her senses, if she does. Just because Cideus is her son will she see the gods destroyed, including herself? And mark you all, every mortal destroyer by the adherents of Cideus, beyond the normal balance established by me in warfare down the ages, destroys each of us by so much. As they decrease, so do we decrease—until in the end we vanish. The hellish influence of Cideus with mortals—"

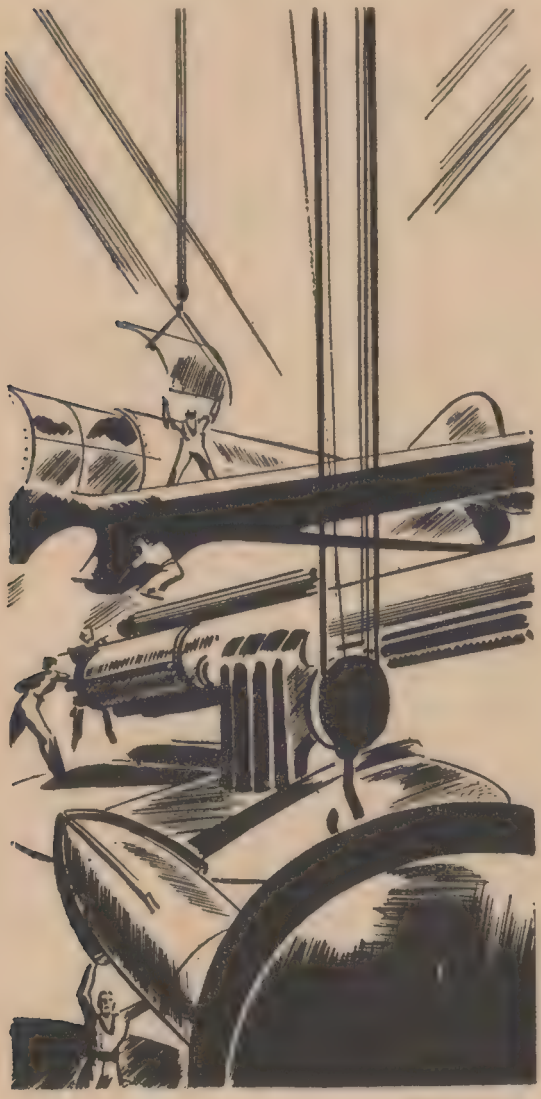
"Is my strongest weapon, Father Mars!" said Cideus. "Perhaps my only weapon. And well you know it—or I wouldn't have been bidden to this desperate conference!"

"I have asked you, Cideus," said Jove calmly, "to await your turn to speak. I ask you again."

Cideus stared at Jove, and something crawled deep down inside him. The calmness of Jove did something to him, made him question himself—feel, for the first time, that he *was* something of an upstart. Jove, for ages, had been the diety of the world. Divinity was unmistakable in every line of his countenance. Massive intelligence showed in his broad, high brow. He was the Master whom all must revere and respect—*and yet,* Cideus thought, *he thinks me dangerous enough that he himself must*

preside at the conférence to decide my fate!

The scowl was on his face again as he yielded to Mars. Perhaps it was because in his youth he had been so proud of his father, had wanted so much to grow up to be like him, that pride stirred in him now, as his father began to speak. That huge mat of black hair, that rugged, fierce, bearded face; that mighty chest, those ponderously thewed arms and legs; that mighty, invincible torso. Mars was a god perfectly suited to the armor that Cideus wore with impudence. Mars had been meant to be a soldier, whose footfalls resounded through the world. His fists were monstrous things, capable of smashing even the conference table of the gods into kindling wood with a blow. Sparks shot from his black eyes. His teeth were broad and thick. A fine, tremendous figure—



Cideus looked at Minerva, from whom he had inherited a handsome face that had stood him in excellent stead—because so few gods or mortals, especially if they were females, could suspect one so handsome of being all that Cideus was.

"I suppose it should grieve me," snapped Mars, "to speak out against my own son. But he has forfeited all right to consideration from me. I have seen too many mortals die, too many gods fade into the shadows of the forgotten, to waste many tears over a hellion like Cideus. I have no intention of playing the sorrowing father, if this conference decides that something must be done—if it can—to make an end of the double-dealing Cideus has loosed upon our worshipers!

"I am a god, born out of the will of combative mortals. I am Mars, the god of war. My conduct of war has always been honest. The gods have, at times, fought among themselves. But it has always been a game, because the gods could not die, could not be killed, and no decision was ever reached. But there were mortals, millions of them, who could wage war to a decision—using, in their fashions, the thunderbolt of Father Jove, the wisdom of Minerva, the labors of Vulcan. You, Father Jove, did

nothing to stop this, having given to mortals the right to fulfill their own destinies. But you did delegate to me the task of regulation. I accepted it with alacrity, though it would have come to me in any case, because mortals had a crying need for me.

"There was one thing I always insisted on: reasonable fairness, sportsmanship. When one mortal destroyed another, he faced that other one, gave him a chance. Both combatants had two arms with which to fight, two legs with which to stand—or run away if they so desired. They were proud of their honor, their fairness, their prowess; prouder still if they could be proud at the same time of their adversaries. They had weapons commensurate with their knowledge of the inventions of Vulcan. I was the judge of that, agreeing for the balance of power to be on the side of the mortal, or aggregation of mortals, having the better weapons—because this was balanced usually by the fact that mortals having the better weapons, were often numerically stronger. Mortals fought face to face, to the death, neither asking nor giving quarter—*but able to ask or give if need arose!* Wars were fought man to man, breast to breast, army against army—"

WHY MUST we dwell on these hideous details?" said Minerva, her voice breaking a little. "We already know all about it, have known since time immemorial. And what has it to do with the fate of my son, Cideus?"

Mars glared at Minerva and went on as though there had been no interruption. "There was honesty in wars when I was in command. I try still to keep wars honest, but since Cideus has reached godhood, what happens?"

"Your own son betrays you!" snapped Vulcan. "Just as he betrays his mother and causes the destruction of her temples. Just as he betrays me and causes the destruction of *my* temples to labor—my temples in which metal is welded and molded and shaped to the ends of progress—my temples in which works are produced for the betterment of mortals—my temples to *labor*—my temples filled with mortals who worship the fruit of their hands, and of mine! He betrays Father Jove, too, whose temples are riven asunder, whose priests are destroyed, whose priestesses are violated—in the name of war that shames the very name of war, and brings the mighty name of Mars to hideous disrepute—"

"For once I agree with Vulcan," said Mars, "but if you will permit me to go on, Vulcan? I asked you what happens, now that Cideus has wormed his way into the councils of war? Mortals on both sides of a conflict fail, now, to behave with honor, as they once did. Because of the advice of Cideus, who, because he is a god, cares not who wins, and spreads his doctrines on either side. Honor and sportsmanship are no more. Horror creeps in to make the gods shudder and wish they dared destroy all mortals, lest the horror become so great the gods cannot endure it and must die of shame—"

Mars was a commanding, furiously righteous figure as he stood there, showering Cideus and his methods with thunderbolts of wrath. Now he paused for breath before going on.

"I saw no reason to object when good armor and sturdy weapons gave way to no armor at all, nor when bows and arrows gave way to noisier, more deadly weapons, against which armor would have been as nothing. I did not object when weapons became bigger, more deadly, capable of destroying scores upon scores instead of individuals. But it was here that Cideus took a hand, in spite of me. Whether he inspired mortals, or they inspired him, is something for psychologists to interpret—for I am just a soldier, after all. It isn't enough that now it takes only three or four years for an aggregation of mortals to

win a war against another aggregation of mortals, where it used to take twenty or a hundred years, or longer. Now it must be ended before the aggregation attacked even knows that war has started.

"If war be drawn out long enough, as in past times, mortals just born can grow up in time to carry the thing on, even if all the older ones are killed. Thus there is always the nucleus of an army as, it seems to me, there should be—since every generation of mortals must have its war. But not now! Not the way Cideus manages things—and he won't listen to me any longer. The perfect solution, according to Cideus, if we are to judge from past results, is for the aggressor to be able to destroy the entire enemy nation in its sleep, before it even realizes that there is a war—for wars are no longer even declared!"

"WHY DECLARE war?" asked Cideus coldly. "It simply warns the enemy that you are attacking, and gives him a chance to kill off your soldiers! That is utterly absurd."

Mars choked on his wrath, but managed not to answer his son directly, to dignify the remarks of Cideus by attempting to rebut them. Besides, Cideus had an answer for everything. It might not be right, but since his whole attitude dared even the gods to dispute him, they seldom did. Mars went on.

"Obviously this will lead to one result: utter annihilation of mortals. Then what shall we do, Father Jove? There will be nobody left to remember us, and we shall cease to be—as gods live only as they are fed by those who believe in them and worship them. We die if our mortal believers die, Father Jove. When they exist no longer, we exist no longer. Their annihilation must be halted—by somehow staying the evil genius of Cideus."

Jove looked around the table, at the lovely face of Minerva, the swart face of Mars, now sitting again, heavily panting, refusing to look at the face of his son. Joe looked at the worried, work-lined face of Vulcan. Yes, the gods were fighting for their very existence. He saw that fact whichever way he looked, and nowhere more plainly than on the face of Cideus, his grandson.

"He thinks there is nothing we can do to punish him," thought Jove, *"because our existence as well as his depends on the mortals who believe in us—and day by day and week by week, more mortals lean toward the teachings and the example of Cideus. Have we called Cideus too late to the conference? Is he already too strong for us? Does he not realize that if we are destroyed, he, too, must be destroyed? That with every incident of wholesale destruction of mortals he destroys himself just so much?"*

But then, suddenly, Jove saw the fallacy of his reasoning; knew why Cideus did not fear the fate that would be meted out to all the other gods if Cideus were allowed to continue unchecked the working out of his mad destiny.

"He has thrown his influence to one nation, or combination of nations of mortals, and when they have massacred all others, every surviving mortal will be a faithful worshiper of Cideus! And they will have no god but Cideus! Thus are all the rest of us doomed!"

Did Jove, in such a circumstance, even desire to survive? He asked himself that question, and the answer was a tired negative—and therein, he knew, lay the greatest danger to the gods. His knowledge gave him strength to keep on fighting—strength for Jove who'd never known a lack of it in all his godhood.

"Vulcan," he said, determination in his voice so marked that Cideus, rather bored with the proceedings up to now, turned a startled glance toward his grandfather, "will you state your case before the council of the gods?"

IV.

CIDEUS studied Vulcan as the god of work rose to his feet a bit unsteadily. Vulcan, the Lame One, had a romantic history. Cideus knew most of it, of course. In babyhood, for some transgression, Vulcan had been hurled from Olympus and an injury done his leg. Later, when he was quite grown, he had again transgressed and been hurled from Olympus. This time he had fallen for a whole day, and his leg had again been injured. From that time to this, god though he was, his leg had never been whole again. He had always limped. Realizing this for the first time, Cideus had some doubt. For the first time he experienced fear of the vengeance of the gods. For if Vulcan, for no great transgression, had taken an injury which had never healed down the centuries, might it not be possible that the gods could do something to Cideus after all?

Could they destroy him?

Could they banish him beyond all possible contact with mortals—so necessary to his existence? Just what *were* the powers of the gods, especially of Jove, the All-Father, the Intelligent? Was Cideus right in holding them all in contempt, because they could do nothing to him? Maybe he was wrong! Surely he was partially wrong, since obviously Vulcan had suffered an injury that had never been corrected.

A slight touch of fear entered the heart of Cideus. A god, of course, could not be a coward, he told himself, yet he was troubled when he looked at the lame leg of Vulcan—troubled and uneasy. He always looked out for himself—and his adherents among mortals—but was he doing so now, to the best of his ability? Was he being contemptuous when he should be conciliatory? Was he going against all his own teachings, and taking a chance with his own skin? If the gods could punish him—and they must think they could, or they wouldn't be talking of punishment—maybe he'd better temporize, use his natural eloquence, do something to turn away their wrath—

"—Cideus inspires blasphemy," Vulcan was saying, in that rather stumbling way of his, "by bringing about the destruction of my temples. My temples, as gods and mortals know, are the buildings in which the honest labor of the world is done. Manufacturing establishments, wherein masterpieces are created, for the greater comfort of mortals, and the greater glory of the gods. These temples should be free from danger, because they are the crying need of all mortals. In them chariots are made, machines for weaving—"

"And instruments for the making of my kind of war!" snapped Cideus.

"Yes," said Vulcan, a slight smile on his face. "I know if I did not mention them, you, being a natural boaster, would. Yes, in *my* temples you, Cideus, have caused your worshipers to blaspheme me. In my temples, dedicated to chariots for mortals—chariots that travel in many ways, even into the skies where only gods were wont to travel—you have, by trickery, caused machines of destruction to be built. I am glad that you yourself see fit to mention them!

"Why are you not content with your own temples, Cideus? Did you think we did not know of them? Of the temples, row on row, on either side of the Rhine? *Your* temples, Cideus, protected against war by every modern contrivance and, I am ashamed to say, materials shaped in temples of my own—and used against my will! Are your temples in danger when there is war among mortals, Cideus? Not when it is waged in accordance with your ideas, Cideus!

"For you give to mortals who worship you, and erect those temples to you—along the Rhine and elsewhere—

the power of flight, and the materials of hideous destruction. With the power of flight they pass over *your* temples, and touch them not; they wing their ways straight to *my* temples, or the temples of Minerva of Jove—temples wherein the heavenly father has been worshiped since time immemorial—and from their winged chariots they drop the hideous contrivances born out of your black soul, Cideus! These contrivances disintegrate on contact, and invisible, hellish things come forth—and attack mortals! Those mortals die—and they are not the mortals whom Mars would have used in battle, but the wives and the children of these!

"Thus you protect *your* followers, that they may continue to worship you, and you continue to grow stronger, more contemptuous anl contemptible, while the rest of us diminish: Jove with the diminishing of reverence for holy things, Minerva with the destruction of her temples of learning, myself with the destruction of temples dedicated to progress, to labor, to earning, to honest production—"

"WHAT'S THE USE of your temples, Vulcan, or the temples of my mother, if there are no mortals left to worship in any of them?"

"Silence, you unutterable—" It was a savage shout from Jove, who so far forgot himself as to rise from his chair and glare at Cideus; but regained control of himself with these three words uttered, yet nevertheless proved to Cideus how deep was the hatred for himself he was building up in the mind of Jove. He could see that but for a tremendous effort of will, Jove would have hurled his traditional thunderbolts at the body of his grandson. But would they have destroyed, or even injured him? Cideus wondered, and was glad that Jove had not hurled them. He, Cideus, must first be *sure* of his invulnerability— He had almost provoked Jove too far.

"Go on, Vulcan," said Jove softly, sinking back, turning his head away from his grandson.

"Why didn't you strike him dead with thunderbolts, Father Jove?" asked Mars. "Or give me permission to smash him to pieces with my fists? Why must I keep remembering that I am a god, while this sniveling thing defiles the very name of god? I am old, yet with your permission, Father Jove, I swear I will tear this beast into shreds with my bare hands! Why need we talk further? Has he not condemned himself, time after time, out of his own smirking mouth? Give him to me! As his father—who is ashamed of his fatherhood—who has a better right to annihilate him?"

"Peace, Mars," said Jove. "Ours shall be the justice of the gods in council, not personal vengeance."

"Vulcan, you speak of temples along the Rhine?"

"Yes, Father Jove, buried temples to Cideus, made not for worship, but for destruction—for the destruction of as many mortals as possible in the briefest period of time. And by such wholesale destruction we ourselves are destroyed a little—unless swift action is taken to restrain Cideus!"

Cideus, listening, thought: *"Vulcan is blind as a bat in many ways. Can't he understand that wars end only when victory has been achieved, a decision reached? Isn't any plan of campaign, any method of conducting a war that speeds the end, thoroughly justified? Can't he see that it is no worse to destroy babies and women than men? Destroy babies and they never know the hardships of living, never grow up to realize the terrors of war. Destroy women and they are through with bearing children who must eventually go to war—how simple it is, if they would only see. All are mortal. If any die, what matters the age or the sex? And*

are not all mortals condemned to die the moment they are conceived in any case?"

"I ask," said Vulcan, winding up his plea, "that Cideus be prevented from all further contact with mortals. How it can be done I do not know; that is a problem for the conference. That it must be done I am sure, else the gods themselves are done. Surely it must be possible for Father Jove, to whom all things are possible, to remove Cideus from the minds, the hearts and the souls of mortals—and thus to destroy him. I suggest that this be done, and immediately, before he contacts even one mortal again!"

Vulcan sat down.

JOVE SAT LOST in thought for a time, as though sorting out in his mind what he would say, now that his turn had come. Cideus and the others kept their eyes fastened to the now benign countenance of Jove. Cideus, in spite of himself, began to feel things—pride of ancestry, for one thing. There, weighing the fate of Cideus, sat the heavenly father, Jove. The others might say what they like, but in the final analysis, the last word was Jove's. For countless generations he had been venerated of mortals—his power had been absolute. Here and there, lately, some of it had gone perhaps, because mortals were prone to forget their gods—and by forgetting, weaken them. But Jove, all-powerful, should last a millions years and more, even if all mortals forgot.

Cideus had no hint from the face of Jove. What a massive face it was! How high the forehead, temple of intelligence. Minerva had been given all wisdom by Jove, as just one of his manifestations—one small bit of his All-ness. Cideus' pride grew somewhat, as he thought of these things. Was Jove right, Cideus wrong, after all? The Old One had ruled everything and everybody, for untold centuries, and had done a pretty good job of it, on the whole.

Time passed as Jove sat thinking. But finally, when the tension had all but reached the breaking point, Jove looked down the table and began to speak.

V.

JOVE BOWED his head till his deep-set eyes seemed to regard only the massive, dark wood of the age-old table. "Each of you is of me, and each of you knows scomething of the things I now must say. The mortals of the world sustain us with their worship—their acknowledgment of the things we are and epitomize—and consciousness, intelligence, is the essence of all of them, and all of us. I am Intelligence.

"Each of the mortals has a little of that—and exists a little while. And the more of that he has, the more consciousness of his own existence, his own individualness, and more fiercely does he strive for life and existence. The rabbit knows no fear of death—he does not know he lives. He runs from danger only as an automatic reaction, as automatic as the bending of the sunflower as the sun circles the sky.

"Men have more knowledge of their own existence—and it is for this that they fear death. The destruction of men is of more moment than the annihilation of a lesser creature because of that; man has more consciousness—more intelligence of being. So with gods. The gods have vaster consciousness of being, a consciousness fed by the lesser consciousness of the millions of Mankind.

"Yet in the ordering of the world, I set Mars to be the lord and guide and ruler of struggling men, I allowed warfare. Men were killed, but Mankind prospered and grew strong. Striving is not bad—it is the source of strength, and Mars was the master of striving men. The strong in body and sound in arm were admired. The man, who had honor and courage and wisdom, waxed

strong and grew old in honor; the coward and the weakling and the stupid died out.

"Now Cideus invents a new warfare. The sly coward, who slinks in ambush, he honors. The weakling, who makes promises to honorable men—and stabs the man who would not think to knife another's back, he encourages. His warfare does not test Mankind—it tests a few who think for the many. The few grow slyer, more weaslelike each year; the race of mortal men send forth its best to battle, while the worst slink home to breed.

"Cideus seeks an army of puppets, his leaders must control a mass of mindless slaves, not the fighting, striving men that Mars led forth.

"For Cideus, perhaps, well enough. The slaves his priests breed up are taught to worship him, and him alone. Cideus and the ways and beliefs of Cideus are glorified. We—are forgotten.

"It is hard to determine the obliteration of a man, for the man has consciousness of being. Even more, it is hard to determine the vanishment of a god.

"Cideus, the time has come for you to defend yourself, to explain. You have the floor and the word."

Cideus strode to his grandfather, this time bending the knee. He went back to his mother, after Jove had touched his golden hair gently. Minerva's whole body was trembling, and Cideus knew why. She was, and must continue to be, a goddess first, a mother second. If the decision were to be against Cideus, she would adhere to it, though her heart were torn asunder. And for the heart of a goddess to be thus torn was a mighty, terrible thing, because death never dropped its black mantle to take away the hurt—which thus must endure for eternity.

Cideus looked at Mars, his father, and saw something of terror in his father's face, too.

"He's sorry he didn't let it ride," thought Cideus, with a warm glow about his heart for his father. *"It could have been passed up for a few centuries, without Jove noticing very much; because he has got so in the habit of delegating war-*

making to Mars, and allowing mortals, otherwise, to run their own affairs."

"My father," said Cideus, bowing. "My mother. And Father of us all. You, too, Vulcan. I am on trial. That is what it amounts to. I shall tell all of you why I have done as I have done, why, if I am not prevented, I shall continue to do as I have done. and even to do worse as I learn how to do worse. Better, from my own viewpoint, worse from yours—and worse, I must admit, from the viewpoint of a great many mortals. I am the son of Mars. I am Cideus. I am the grandson of Jove, and the son of Minerva. I have been delegated some of the powers of my father, who had them in his turn from Father Jove. If I have taken other powers without permission, it is because I thought it proper to do so."

Cideus paused to take a breath. Without realizing that he did so, he began to stamp back and forth, marching. Now he looked fiercely into the face of Mars, now into the face of Vulcan; now into the face of Mars, now into the white, strained face of Minerva.

"EVERYTHING is changing," he cried. "Everything except the gods, who never change—until the coming of the changeling! Oh, I admit it. I *am* a changeling, but with the same right, surely, of working out my destiny that Jove gave to the lowliest of mortals. Very well, let us start from the time when I first broke with my father, Mars. His methods have been cumbersome. He has allowed increasingly greater numbers of mortals to mobilize, when questions of interest to mortals were in dispute—against other increasingly greater aggregations of mortals. And so, year by year, and generation by generation, wars have been waged on a bigger and bigger scale. More men were destroyed in these wars, of course. But then, were there not an increasingly greater number of mortals born into the world, and an increasingly greater number of women to bear them? So, nothing had really changed, had it? War still didn't settle things.

"It was simply a bigger game, that was all. Weapons wherewith to wage it were stronger as mortals evolved; but in the final analysis there was no difference. Death was death, and the manner of bringing it about mattered not at all. An arrow from a bow pierced the heart of a soldier, and the soldier died. Later, a mightier projectile, with something of Vulcan in its middle, struck, exploded, and erased a thousand soldiers. On the face of it this was far worse than the arrow. But was it? Weren't there really a thousand now to take the place of the one, because more mortals had been born into the world? Exactly! I saw this very soon, and realized that war would go on to the end of time, with no decision arrived at, unless something were done—something drastic!"

"Take heed, Cideus," said Jove, scarcely above a whisper, "that from this moment on you do not condemn yourself!"

"Cideus! My son, Cideus!" it was almost a wail from Minerva.

"I can but tell the truth," said Cideus. "I arrived at certain conclusions. There were ways to win wars, I found. And you didn't have to destroy a vast number of people to do it. There were ways of grabbing territory without fighting. By the use of terror. It was possible, with the use of finesse—which meant in some cases, threats of dreadful destruction, and the power to carry out the threats if they were ignored—to frighten whole aggregations of mortals into bloodless submission to the aggregation making good on their threats!"

"Thus," interrupted Vulcan, "causing whole aggregations to become slaves of whole other aggregations! Slavery for life, for many lives, for many generations! Far better wholesale destruction, to slavery!"

"Right, Vulcan!" said Cideus, his voice a ringing challenge. "But isn't the whole idea of war, the idea of subjugation? What's the use of winning a war if, after you have won it, you gain territory covered only with the dead of the other side, who must be buried? Wars won mean lands won, and lands won require the hands of many defeated ones to work them. Now, instead of working for themselves, the defeated ones must work for their conquerors!"

"Slavery, worse than death!" insisted Vulcan.

"But a decision reached!" said Cideus. "Reached via threats, and the ability to make good on them. Aggressors with weapons capable of destroying their enemies in the blinking of an eye—who made sure that the enemies *knew* of such weapons! Thus the bloodless victory!"

"Slavery!" said Vulcan. "Cideus, you are the perfect schemer!"

"AND IF," interpolated Mars, "even threats did not cause the enemy to quail, to submit to slavery?"

"Then anything that the aggressor did to bring about a decision was justified. I didn't have that idea at first. I got it, actually, from several mortals who thought they were just about as close to godhood as was possible for mortals. They had the power of death over their people, and the enemies of their people. If they didn't possess the power of creation, it was because the matter had been overlooked, and they themselves could straighten it out, by decree, when they got around to it. You asked what if the prospective victims refused to submit to slavery, chose to die by myriads instead? The answer was simple: they were allowed so to die, the more and faster, the sooner a decision could be reached—"

"But war was no longer confined to males!" said Vulcan.

"No! That was old-fashioned!" cried Cideus. "Hitherto it had always been the males who waged war—the *adult* males. Now, aided and abetted by me—I confess it here and now—they went further. I gave them the wings of Mercury, that they might fly high over the heads of their enemies. I gave them strength and capacity, and they carried powers over the heads of their enemies that even Vulcan does not possess. They carried them in tiny capsules, or in big capsules, depending on what they were. They dropped them. What was the result, my family? The result was a speedy decision.

"When children and women began to die—while the men lived because they remained safe in the temples here and there which Vulcan has called blasphemies—and their bellies to bloat, and their eyes to pop out of their corpses, because their insides were crawling with death too tiny for even the gods to see; when, I say, thousands, millions, of babies and women were slain—or will be slain when war is made again, if they and I have our way—a decision, fast and sure, was certain. Why? Because the babies would not live to grow up and carry on the struggle. Because the females would not live to bring forth other children to carry on the war."

"Wholesale destruction!" said Vulcan, his voice very low. It was horrible, Cideus could sense that, when even Vulcan quailed for Cideus had a pretty good memory himself, about what Vulcan had done in other times, other places—at Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabii—things so terrible that mortals remembered them down the centuries as well as if they had been happenings of yesterday. Vulcan, responsible for these things that had shocked the world beyond forgetting, was shocked now in his turn by the behavior of Cideus and the results thereof. Cideus, realizing this, reacted strangely: he would add to the shock if possible, let them all realize

that he had actually understated what could be done.

"Vast areas," he went on, "greater even than the fields of Elysium, covered with the bloated corpses of mortal women and their offspring. Think of it, all of you! Just as mortals charged with the conduct of war will think of it. What manner of mortals, faced with such ghastliness, would prolong a war? Thus my methods shorten wars, force decisions. Dead women never again bear children for use in war. Children do not grow up to become soldiers, or the mothers, wives or sisters of soldiers. Moreover, for every female killed before she has borne offspring, and every male killed before he can father offspring, a line is destroyed to the end of time. *That,* my family, is destruction indeed! *That* will bring about a speedy decision in *any* war. Not only a decision now, but a decision affecting mortals to the very end of the race!"

"OUR END, too, don't forget!" said Vulcan. "You seem to forget that as mortals live and flourish, so do we live and flourish. When there are none to speak our names, to revere us, to know that we ever existed, we ourselves cease to exist!"

"Thoughtful of you!" said Minerva sadly. "Even you think only of yourself, but what of the mortals involved?"

"They *are* ourselves, eternally and inescapably!" said Vulcan.

"Nonsense!" said Cideus. "If Father Jove is the All-Father we have always believed, still believe, why can he not, if he elects, create indestructibles, robots. They can be forged in the fires of Vulcan. They can even be made to reproduce—"

"To be the creator and the god of robots!" said Jove. "The very idea makes me quail. There is no soul in them, no matter what may be done about it. Mortals have feelings, sometimes as deep as those of the gods. They have capacity for suffering and happiness. They know joy and sorrow."

"Joy ends, sorrow ends, when a mortal dies!" said Cideus. "Does it then matter that he ever lived? A flick of the wrist, a touch of the hand, and a mortal is nothing but the clay which composes him. What does it matter, really, that his death is brought about, or how? Mortals are the cheapest things in creation. Some of Vulcan's machinery is worth more, literally, than thousands of mortals! For some machinery cannot be replaced; mortals can be replaced so simply, so prolifically, that it is really silly to worry about the death of any or all of them. Like rabbits or guinea pigs, they can populate the earth again in time."

"Make an end, Cideus! Make an end!" cried Minerva, as though it had taken all this time for her to grasp the real horror of her son's words. Could this really be the son she had nursed, had spoiled through his childhood, had filled with her wisdom, had given to Mars as his assistant when he had become a god grown? Was this monster beyond believing, the child of her bosom?

Cideus looked at his mother. To him she had always been—besides beautiful—the goddess most sure of herself in every department of her life. She gave forth wisdom to the masses with assurance, because she knew her wisdom good. No mortal or group of mortals could ask a question she could not answer. She knew all there was to know. Yet now she was in terror, and he knew why. He knew that she believed him doomed—though to just what fate he could not understand, because there was none here, he was ure of that, able to do anything drastic to him, that would curtail his activities for even a little while. Yet Minerva was not easily befooled. And if she were afraid, then it behooved *him* to be afraid, but of what?

"My influence with mortals is my greatest weapon, Mars!" he had snapped at his father. But might there not be knowledge hitherto denied him, knowledge that gave power over him to Mars, to Jove, Minerva, even to Vulcan? Power capable of destroying even this darling of belligerent mortals?

Minerva suffered, that was plain—because she foresaw herself helping to send him to some unmentioned Limbo. What could it be? What could they possibly do to him, when he was the strongest of all the gods, stronger even than Jove, whom mortals had all but forgotten, save as a myth?

"Forget the sorrow, mother!" he snapped. "Nobody here can do anything to me. I can handle any situation that arises. You're all passé, weak, incapable of thwarting me, even of delaying me in my march to destiny—because I am of the majority of mortals!"

"You are wise, my son," she said piteously, "but not wise enough to know that in the end, which cannot be long delayed, the very power you boast of, your influence with the majority of mortals, will turn against you. For Father Jove has said that mortals feel, suffer—and while a god might look unmoved upon mortals piled high and dead over the face of the world, surviving mortals would never do so! Survivors —*your* mortals, Cideus!—will themselves decree that it shall never happen again. And when that time comes—and it will be soon, Cideus!—Father Jove will come back into his own, and Mars, little by little, and Vulcan a great deal. I, too, will come back into the hearts of mortals. But you, my son, will be cast into outer darkness by the very ones of whom you are now the hero!"

"And Mars, my father, with his antiquated ways of war? What of him, Mother Minerva? If war will end, what of the maker of all wars?"

"Energy, bubbling, uncontrollable, will be manifested in games, then, and Mars will be master of the games. There will be no killing, though games will be rough and ready and almost lethal—"

"YOU SEE, Cideus?" said Mars, grimly interrupting. "I, too, have planned a new kind of war. War, in the long run, is conflict, competition. But why should it lead hundreds, thousands, millions, to death? Do they not die soon enough, all of them, in any case? Before I even get to know their faces? Why not conflict, competition, which is strenuous as war, but does not kill? Games, Cideus, games on which decisions rest, by rules agreed upon before contests begin! Why should men's lives rest on a battle's outcome, when issues can as well be decided by the outcome of games?"

Cideus sneered: "Why don't nations flip coins to decide their disputes? It's just as sensible."

"Perhaps more so," said Jove.

Cideus looked about at their faces again. To his utter amazement he saw pity for him in all of them! Why, how could this be? It was for him to pity the old fogies, the has-beens—not for them to pity *him!* What were they holding back from him, anyhow? Why did they seem so sure of themselves, of their ability to handle him? Could he believe entirely in the sincerity of all their expression? Since he was part of all these gods, anything that happened to them would happen in a measure to him, of course. But if he were stronger than all of them together he could suffer all that happened to them, and scarcely be weakened at all.

But not so the other way. The gods were, as gods, finished and done with. Juno, for instance, almost forgotten of mortals—had become too weak even to attend conferences. And she was self-conscious, because her voice was so querulous. *She* saw the handwriting on the wall if nobody else did. She had al-

ways regarded him as her favorite among the gods, and he had never done anything as a small god, without wondering what grandmother Juno would think about it. Did she know, now, what was going on? What they had in mind to do with him? For just a moment he wished he might—as he had so often done in the long ago—put his head in her lap and beg for her sympathy and understanding. Had she, too, forsaken him? She must have, else she'd have been here, greater champion of Cideus even than Minerva.

Jove stared at space for a long time, and silence filled with infinite tension held sway in the household of the gods. Obviously Jove wished to prolong the situation; Jove knew that time usually healed all wounds, settled all questions. And he *must* wish to save Cideus, else he would have done something without even bothering to call a conference. Jove would be his champion, too, if it were godly possible. But never Mars!

Mars, having taken his stand, would hold it at all costs. Wise of the old blusterer, Cideus thought, to devote his energy, his lust for competitive action among mortals, to strenuous games which caused no bloodshed. That would appeal to a vast segment or mortal society, Cideus knew. Unfortunately though—for Mars—that segment of society did not have the authority to dictate to the rest of society. The leaders who believed as Cideus did, did have such authority. And mortals were like sheep, following the loudest-talking leader, especially if that leader had managed to win a time or two, spectacularly. Games, to settle differences between nations of mortals! That was worse than an ancient idea of war, where chosen knights, wearing the colors of their forces, fought it out between the lines to decisions, on which opposing aggregations must abide. It wasn't archaic, exactly—for the ancient idea had simply been brought down to date, and dressed in different garments, deprived of its lethal weapons. Absurd beyond words!

"Has anyone else anything to say?" asked Jove—hopefully, Cideus thought. "Minerva?"

Minerva, the loveliest goddess on Olympus, rose again to her dainty feet.

VI.

"YES, Father Jove," said Minerva, "I have something further to say. Give me my son Cideus. Give him back to me. I shall try to convince him, by the exercise of pure reason, that he inspires a false way of living, a hideous way of dying, among mortals. I undertake to promise that he will cease to override his jealous father Mars. I shall see that he makes an end even of making war!"

Before Cideus, amazed, could interrupt, Jove broke in.

"Will you deliver yourself into the guardianship of Minerva, Cideus? Will you harken to her wisdom? We will gladly accept your parole, if you will!" Cideus had by this time lashed himself into a cold fury. Ever since he had been little he had been able to do it. He'd found, then, that if he pretended hard enough to be angry, it wasn't very long before he really *was* angry—at which time Minerva had always been all too glad to give in to him, so that he cease his tantrums. Maybe even yet it would work.

"I ask nothing of Minerva," he said. "I no longer wish to be tied to apron strings, even those of my mother! If, as she herself has said, and the rest of you have indicated, she is responsible for my being as I am—a changeling, a mad mobster!—what can she do for me now, except make me worse? I want nothing of her. My parole? Why should I give it to weaklings? Better that I ask all of you, for *your* paroles!"

There was silence, after he had finished, empty of gasps of horror, empty

of everything except abysmal unbelief. Through it finally cut the voice of Mars, glacial in its coldness, bitter as lye.

"You are so sure you are greater than any of us or all of us, Cideus. Yet I say to you that your days are numbered, because you are a monster. The world will come back, one day, to what it was —when master mobsters, as you call yourself, will be repudiated by your mortal followers, more certainly than they now repudiate their sacred treaties, their solemn promises, their debts of material honor. I believe in your mortal followers enough to believe in this—because once those followers were mine. They had souls, then. Those souls will again be made manifest, after *your* madness has lifted from them. I do not threaten you, Cideus. I warn you! There was once a dark god among us, when we were many, in the long ago, and his name was Lucifer. He was cast out of the abode of the gods, and fell for ages. Then he looked back to see how far he had fallen, and saw that the distance was so far he could never get back, though he struggled through all eternity! The fall of Lucifer, my monster son, will be as the fall of Vulcan from Olympus, compared to the depths into which you will be plunged when your mortals turn against you!"

NO RANTING now from Mars, no blustering, no bombast. Yet his cold words fell about the head of Cideus like hail from the coldest ends of the earth. Greater in this moment was Mars, than at any time since Cideus could remember him. Cideus felt a twingle of doubt, for Mars was of the gods, possessing their gifts of prophecy—and what he said might well be true.

Mars, even as he foretold the fate of his son Cideus, had a trace of sadness in his eyes! Mars, whom Cideus had all but banished into nowhere, by usurping his place amoung mortals, *Pitied Cideus!* Why should he pity him, if he feared him greatly? There was something here that Cideus, for all his wisdom, his cunning, could not grasp.

"I could answer your challenge, my father," said Cideus, feeling his way, "by suggesting a test of strength—mine against that of all the rest of you. If I win over you, for instance, will you step down until I have proved myself, or you are right?"

"Why should I step down?" snapped Mars. "Am I not doing a greater work even now, than you are? Have I not changed the spirit of war among some mortals, to a spirit of competition, manifested in games? I find it a good thing to have done. I grow stronger as the games spread through the realms of mortals. Shortly, Cideus, shortly, I shall be stronger for my games than you will be with your devastation!"

A delicate smile touched the face of Jove—and there was sadness in *it,* too. For a moment Cideus thought that Jove was amused that Mars had fallen so low as to become referee and inspirer of insipid games, when for so many ages he had led the forces of war, had inspired the spirit of combativeness in mortals. But no, it wasn't that, Cideus saw, that caused the sadness of Jove. He, like Minerva, like Mars, was *sorry for Cideus!*

Why? Why? Because they knew him doomed, no matter what developed, even if he won a test of strength such as he had mentioned in his challenge to Mars?

Jove now turned to Cideus.

"My grandson, my once more than son, Cideus," he said. "Have you anything to say now, why action should not be had against you, on the strength not only of what has been said against you here, but on account of what you yourself have not only admitted, but boasted about?"

"I," said Cideus, "can take anything

this outmoded conference can hand out, and come back for more!"

"You will not change? For Minerva, for me, for Mars—even for Juno?"

"No! Why should I? It isn't I who should change, but *you!* You're all as good as dead, and don't even realize it!"

"Our wisdom, Cideus, served the world—and well!—for ages before you came into it. It is possible, you know, that you are utterly wrong."

"How could I be, and be one with the gods who boast of their power, as you are doing?"

"With all your ability to scheme, Cideus," went on Jove gently, "with all your fine wits, why must you condemn yourself at our hands, when you should be able to find a compromise satisfactory to us all, and save yourself from punishment?"

"Why should I? What can you do to me? And why should I be less than honest? I make no promises I cannot keep—in that I am somewhat different from my mortal followers! I stand before you all, exactly as I am. I can, as a god—with some personal pride—do nothing else!"

Again the long, pregnant pause, in which it seemed that even the heavens and earth grew still as the gods were still.

"Then," said Jove, "there is no alternative. I now call for a vote. Since you are one of us, do you, yourself, lead the vote, Cideus. Shall this body deal out punishment to Cideus the killer? What say you, Cideus?"

"If all that has been said against me, and all I have admitted, is against the best interests of the family—then I vote for whatever punishment you care to administer—*and laugh when I think of you really being able to punish me!*"

"No, Cideus, no! Not against yourself! This is utter madness indeed.' That was the stricken voice of Minerva his mother.

VII.

INEXORABLY the voting went on.

"Minerva?" said Jove softly.

"May all the gods forgive me!" moaned Minerva. "May I forgive myself before eternity ends. I must vote against my own son. I do so vote—for some punishment that will render him powerless to contact mortals!"

"That means extinction, Minerva," said Jove. She nodded, sank back into her seat.

"Mars!"

"I vote against him. Were it not for the harm he would do to mortals I would vote his continuance along the lines he has chosen—for by that way he travels even faster to oblivion. Unfortunately, he takes with him too many of our own adherents. Therefore I vote that he be stopped."

"Vulcan?"

"Punishment!"

"I have no need of voting," said Jove, "but lest I seem to be shirking my plain duty, I shall vote anyhow. Punishment for Cideus, and in a way that will strike the deepest possible. It shall be punishment to his pride, his ego, that he won't forget this side of eternity. Is there any last thing you would like to do or say, before I say what your punishment is to be, Cideus?"

"Only that I may bid good-by to my beloved grandmother, Juno, for if you are able to render me harmless I shall never see her again. If you are not, I shall never return to Olympus."

"I had expected this request, Cideus," said Jove. "I told Juno what would happen at this conference, and she sent me a message to give you: that she did not wish to see you again if you persisted in your present way. Since you so persist, you have her message."

"It is the one thing," said Cideus, his voice very low, "that might have induced me to change. I confess freely before you all that this message from

my grandmother has touched me more deeply, has gone deeper into my heart, than anything you have said or done, all of you, or anything that may follow. But I still could not change. May I hear what is to be done to me—or what you *think* can be done to me?"

"Yes," said Jove. "Perhaps you have not noticed how this meeting has been timed to coincide with certain happenings among mortals—among mortals who worship at my temples, the temples of Minerva, of Mars, of Vulcan, and of Juno—who is my other self, and therefore worshiped from my temples?"

Cideus was puzzled. Just what did Jove mean? No talk here of the wrath of the heavenly father, of thunderbolts hurled against the monster, of giving Cideus to Mars to be crushed between mailed fists, of giving him to Vulcan to be beaten on anvils. No threats to destroy him. No real threats at all. Yet fear began to grow in him as all the

threats of which heaven was capable, would not have caused fear. Had he been tricked somehow? *Was* there a way he could be punished?

"You asked for a test of strength, Cideus—your way against our ways. It is to be given you—your vaunted strength against the strength of the *honest* gods! We have timed things exactly, while outside Olympus mortals have set the stage, set the actors in motion. Among the actors are adherents of each and every one of us, Cideus! Each of us will inspire his own—"

"You mean, Father Jove—"

"We have timed this test to coincide with the outbreak of a general war among mortals! Upon its outcome, Cideus, rests your fate—and ours."

Out of another room, her face very white, her steps slow and stately, strode the mother of gods and mortals, Juno, the feminine manifestation of Jove—whose divine spirit reposed in the hearts of all mortal women, as Cideus well knew.

Juno, who had always loved him, whom he would never cease to love while he lasted—did not even so much as glance at Cideus! No accusation from her soft lips, no threat, no look of contempt, could have smashed at his soul as did the fact that his grandmother, when the crisis came, whereon all the fates of the gods reposed, ignored him!

"The test!" said Jove. "You are ready, Mother Juno?"

Juno nodded—and as she did, it was as though she gave a signal for the roaring of mortal multitudes to penetrate the walls of New Olympus. Cideus smiled—though his smile was sickly—and stepped back from the others, as though accepting his rôle of pariah with a master mobster's pride.

VIII.

INSTANTLY, as on a scroll, the scenes whence the sound emanated appeared upon the wall beyond the council table. Vast and broad and white was that wall—yes, deep enough to serve the divine purpose of Father Jove. For against the wall, and deep beyond it, appeared all the mortals who were exploding into war. Instantly Cideus was the wily commander, inspiring those who served him. He narroyed his eyes to study the various details. His method was a burrowing from within, a sly attack, a quick retreat—attacks from the rear, and from far beyond reach in the heavens. To win at all costs—to the enemy! That was his way. To lose none of his own adherents, since loss of one of them meant that by just so much his own power diminished.

With a contemptuous snap of his fingers he marshaled countless wings—like the wings of dark angels, many enough to blot out mortals' view of the firmament. And he zoomed them into the skies to the limit of their flight—where they would be safe from any attack their enemies could possibly launch. Better still, their enemies did not yet know they had started, were not even expecting them—and so were unprepared. Cideus grinned, for the hideous surprise was his greatest weapon.

But what was this? He heard Juno say softly: "Rally to me, all ye mortal women! If there is to be an end of this horror, we must bring it about. Refuse to bear children. Refuse to produce for the soldiers. Refuse! Refuse! Muster your strength in my name, and make an end of this war—of all wars!"

As Juno spoke even the wings brought into being by the thoughts of Cideus were blotted out by the columns, the waves, the oceans, of mortal women, answering the ringing call of Juno the All-Mother. Thousands of them, millions. Their cries came faintly through the roaring of the wings of the dark angels of Cideus:

"There must be no more war! We

refuse to bear children to be fed to the dogs of combat!"

Cideus even thrilled a little at the sight of female mortals, so many in number they covered all that part of the earth whereon soldiers were not camped. They made a brave show—but they moved in mass formation, and Cideus knew how fatal that could be—and smiled grimly, knowing how he could destroy the strength of Juno. And since she opposed him, he willed himself to forget the love they had always had for each other.

"Harken to me, sons and daughters of mortals, ye who are too young to know the horror of war as Cideus wages it!" came the soft voice of Minerva, with divine feeling vibrating through every word. "Partake of my wisdom, which abhors war as it abhors nothing else known to gods or mortals! Wisdom is the enemy of war because wisdom abhors war! Take ye the wisdom I give you, then, and with it build shields to protect you against aggression!"

So, by the will of Minerva the wise, there appeared on the scroll Jove had set against the wall—her "temples" of learning; her colleges, her universities, her schools. And through their windows Cideus could see the youth of the world at their studies. They, too, were massed, he noted, and the walls of the temples were thin, the roofs of their temples strong enough only to protect them against inclement weather. He smiled again, noting how easy it would be to destroy the strength of Minerva.

Louder roared the black wings of the dark angels, as though playing some hellish, triumphant accompaniment to the thoughts of Cideus, the killer.

"HARKEN unto me!" roared the voice of Mars. "There is nothing but barbarous death without honor in war. Gather to your stadiums, your fields of games, your sprinting courses—to wherever you play the games of your choice. Far better for you all are the games which strengthen your bodies—and thus your minds—than all the false glory of war! I, Mars, know of what I speak, because I am the god of war. I have seen all the wars of the world, and none has ended in glory, and all have ended in death and destruction. Take no heed to the clarion call of war, then, youth of the world! Forget it entirely. Learn from Minerva for the good of your minds and your souls, from me for the good of your bodies!"

Onto the screen, showing the power of the will and the loud voice of Mars, came the fields of mortal games, all crowded together, filled with youth brimming over with joy and grand spirits, eager to compete against one another for the good of their bodies and souls.

College grounds, university grounds, school campuses, were filled with youthful mortals. Enough of them, and far more, to make up an army as big as the biggest—and young, with the world all ahead of them. To them, Cideus saw, war was the method of brutes who, themselves, took no part in it ever, but sent only fools into the fray to die for their "honor." Cideus smiled—for how close to the seats of the learning of Minerva, were the grounds on which Mars marshaled his adherents to play their silly, empty games!

With some little doubt, Cideus looked at Jove, whose face was all transfigured. How many battle like this—battles of divine will—had not Jove fought down the ages?

"Harken unto me, all ye mortals!" came the ringing voice of Jove, that went through the room of conference like all the hosts of heaven marching. "I am Jove. I am Jehovah. I am whatever god ye believe in, for whatever the name of the god you serve is. I am that god, because I am father of all, god of all. There is a war upon you. Hasten then into my temples, and lift up your prayers for peace. If with all your hearts

ye wish it, with all your hearts ye pray, then can I grant you this peace. But the desire must come up from you, because by your wishes I exist, and without them I am nothing. If your wish is for war, even Jove cannot stay the march of the troops. Therefore, get ye into your temples and pray!"

Onto the scroll, which was small enough to cover the one wall, and large enough at the same time to cover the world, appeared the temples of Jove. They were many-shaped, and in them many tongues were spoken. In them Jove was called by many names—and mortals, male and female, old and young, came by millions at the behest of Jove, to pray that war pass them by, not only now, but forever.

What a mustering of strength, thought Cideus! The adherents of Juno and Jove, Minerva and Mars—

He jumped to his feet, crying out:

"Fools! Fools! You have delivered yourselves into the hands of Cideus, as he knew you would. Watch now, Jove, what happens to your temples, when the hand of Cideus flutters the black wings of war!"

The mighty roaring of those ebon wings. Strange, horrible sounds broke through. Then an earthquake that Vulcan himself could not have staged, and for a second the latest picture on the screen was gone.

All looked, when the picture came again—to see the temples of Jove in ruins, and all around the ruins, scattered far and wide, and broken upon the steps leading up to them, were white faces turned upward, their eyes wide open, asking questions of the gods who had bidden them to the temples.

AND CIDEUS laughed in the face of his father.

"Watch, my father, what happens to your flushed-faced mortals who compete with hands and legs instead of weapons! Who believe, with you, that games of any kind, however strenuous, can take the place of the blood and glory of war!"

On the scroll appeared the agile, competitive youth, male and female, who followed the inspiration of Mars. And over them, as they played their games, came the sound of the ebon wings—

And Mars, with a cry of rage, flung himself at his son. Under the fury of that attack, Cideus went down. And terror gripped him, for the hands of his father were mighty. The great wrists were like tree limbs under the hands with which he tore with all his strength, to save himself from destruction. His head banged against the travertine floor, as Mars sought to destroy him. Mars, fighting as Mars had always fought, face to face. And as Mars' fury increased, the sound of the black wings wavered, almost died out—and Cideus, with all his young strength, fought to escape the throttling power of his father's hands, the mighty knees which, astride him, threatened to break his ribs in a hundred places.

Terror struck at the heart of Cideus, terror and something more as he stared up into the furious, black-bearded face of the grand old warrior. There was a stolid, honest power in those mighty, rope-corded arms, the ponderous shoulders, a righteous, blazing anger in the deep-set black eyes flaring into his own. Mars, the forthright; Mars, the bold and lusty fighter maddened into rage at the snake-venomed spawn that called him father, this weak-willed, twisting thing that fought not like a man, learning courage, determination, the strength of comradship in the hard, hot flame of competition, but like a crawling, poisonous snake.

Cideus writhed, his slim, wiry muscles twisting and slipping from Mars' mighty, stub-fingered hands in desperation. Vaguely as he struggled, his darting quickness oozing somehow from Mars' ponderous strength, he became

aware that another had entered the room, the one who had, heretofore, remained away in troubled fear. She was white of face, and her lips were narrowed and whitened with strain and horror, her magnificent eyes darkened with trouble.

Swiftly she moved over and, stepping almost between the two straining, darting antagonists, her low voice drowned in Mars' furious roar, touched each on the shoulder.

For an instant, each halted, staring in black anger at this interference. Then slowly, each looked back at the other.

Cideus looked into Mars' furious face, the stiff wire beard black bristles of anger under his helmet hanging half awry, his bull neck corded with heavy muscles, great arms bent in readiness to grasp again that oozing, weasel-swift killer son of his. There was flame and rage and determination in that face, a queer joy of battle somehow even in this moment of hate. "You writhe like a twisted eel," Mars roared. "You're weak as a mortal, but, by Hades, you slip like an eel! Stand still, you boneless thing, and fight!"

"Stand still! You've stood still for two thousand years—no wonder you cannot hold me, for all your boasted strength. What good is strength? Slip—strike—and slip away. Fight! You—"

"But you can grip, you hairy bear!"

Venus moved slightly. Again her cool, tapering fingers touched them, her dark eyes stared into theirs for a moment wordless.

Cideus looked again at Mars. There was a squat, brutal power to that mighty father of his, his columned legs seeming bowed within their greaves for the layers of toughened sinew on them. His great arms had helped to shape the world over five millenniums. There was a strength and loyalty and queer joy in him; the flame was dying in his eyes now, and a grudging look of half respect replacing it.

CIDEUS' eyes flicked round the hall. The gods looked to Mars and Venus. There was a strange old loyalty among them, a friendship and understanding he, Cideus, had never known. There was something hidden there in Mars' queer, archaic manner that gave him a smile and lift and pleasure.

Cideus had missed that in his modern war; there was no joy in it save victory, and, god of all these modern fighting men, he tasted bitter defeat with every sip of heady victory. In this bitter, sneaking warfare no man or god felt pleasure, only hate and will to kill. "A

poor loser." Mars would say—but how could a loser be other than poorer?

Perhaps Mars had some other secrets that he had missed, some different thing that had made for that queer and lusty flame of joy in his eyes.

"You're wrong, Cideus." Venus' voice was music, very loud for all its softness, for the hall of the gods was very quiet. "Mars drove men up, for climbing is hard, and only those with strength and the drive of determination could advance. There is joy in striving—and not every strife ends half in victory, half in defeat.

"Minerva gave you knowledge—Mars gave you his strange love of struggle. And you find no better thing than pitting knowledge against itself in spiteful, clever killing?

"There is a god we never pass up here, a god that every mortal fights. Have you so lost that portion of my own heritage of love that you cannot see a better use for driving, striving, fighting knowledge?

"Mars trains today the love of striving, the driving, lifting onward push that made man leave his slime. Can not you, with Minerva's heritage of knowlege, see an enemy more worthy of you, than to pit half yourself against your other half? Or do you fear that other foe?"

"Fear? No man or god can say that of me!" Cideus snapped.

Old Mars grunted. "I'll say that for him: he fights with a determination and a drive I'll acknowledge to. He has courage."

"Then face an enemy—an outer enemy you cannot know is part of you! Victory? You've never known one! You fight yourself, like stupid mortals playing at solitaire, and slipping cards against the rules.

"Use that knowledge to fight outer things! You've served Death right well these years—now fight him! Turn those worshipers of struggle and knowledge to fighting a true enemy!

"There's room enough for fighting, straining knowledge—the combative doggedness of Mars and the wisdom of your mother—but turn it out, not stupidly upon yourself and all your family."

Cideus looked down the great table. Venus' cool fingers touched him with their silent magic, and the anger and defiance in him drained away. Only Vulcan had turned away from him; Jove was seated, weakened and distraught, but Vulcan stared hard upon the great scroll. The black-winged planes had vanished, and among the tumbled ruins Vulcan's men and Vulcan's machines were working order, clearing away the chaos.

Cideus' thin, sharp face altered suddenly. "Ho, Game-leg, there should be a better way than that to move loose stone!"

The smoke-darkened Vulcan twisted about, stared at Cideus a moment. His tough-skinned face drooped in a wry grin. "Find it then!"

"By Olympus, I will, old Blacksmith!"

THE END.

When a man tried to raise the Devil HE DID! Read

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DEATH TIME

D. M. BRICKER

DEATH TIME

By D. M. Bricker

Timing, movement, is the essence of living —and living too fast is death in itself!

THE white-walled laboratory was quiet, save for the distant screaming of police sirens, coming faintly through the open window on the warm night air. Santley's long, slender fingers trembled as he brought the gleaming hypodermic closer to my arm, and involuntarily I drew back.

"There is no time to lose—we must hurry!" came the scientist's hoarse, urgent whisper.

I stared at his bloodless, waxen mask of a face, my brain whirling. The story he had just told me seemed incredible; yet, if it were true, that coldly glittering hypodermic needle was the single cause of the inexplicable "instantaneous crime wave" that had struck the city! Every one of the attacks, the lootings and robberies, was explained by this strange injection, which, according to the gaunt scientist's story, had been given by mistake to one of his experimental subjects, a man named Murdoch.

The reaction of this drug was the impossible thing to believe. That it was capable of speeding up the life processes of a human being more than one hundred thousand times—stimulating the cells to such terrific pitch of activity that the body became invisible—overtaxed my imagination. I suddenly regretted the slight flare of curiosity which had led me to Santley's laboratory in response to his telephone call at police headquarters. Too much valuable time had already been wasted in tracking down fruitless tips from cranks.

Yet—suppose there was a being such as this Murdoch? Certainly, if a man could exist in such a state, protected from ordinary means of capture by the invisibility of sheer speed, he would have the city at his mercy! If it were true—if Murdoch was not a creation of the unbalanced mind of a crackpot scientist—by receiving the injection myself I would be able, single-handed, to halt the mysterious crime wave that was slowly throttling the city. I could follow him, fight him on equal terms.

"If I could only be sure!" I muttered.

Santley's bloodshot eyes burned into mine. "You fool! Who else would have the incredible ability to escape the traps you've laid? Who else"—and his voice sank to a ragged whisper—"who else would have need of such immense quantities of food?"

A QUICK thrill of horror went through me. It was true! Living one hundred thousand times faster than normal, he would require one hundred thousand times as much food! My mind went back over the preceding hours' nightmare events, seeing with sudden cold clarity the possible meaning of the fantastic, inordinate thefts of food which had taken place. Overshadowed at first by the unaccountable, terror-inspiring attacks, and by the unusual, striking nature of the robberies, which had occurred in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties, this constant, unending disappearance of foodstuffs from

countless stores and restaurants now assumed a strange significance. The totally incomprehensible lack of clues which had characterized these crimes struck me with renewed force; I recalled the amazing fact that there had been no witnesses. In the light of Santley's story, the explanation was stupendously simple!

Outside, the frantic, distant sirens had increased in number. My nerves tightened. The police, I knew, were dazed and disorganized, totally unable to cope with the storm of calls that continually burst on the desk at radio headquarters. A cold bead of sweat fell from my brow as my eyes rested on the hypodermic needle. It was an insane hope. Yet—everything about the case was insane, unprecedented. I suddenly knew that I did not dare overlook the possibility that the story was true!

I shuddered, hesitated one last moment. "You have the antidote?"

Santley's eyes flickered away from me. Silently, he produced a small, squat bottle, filled with an amber fluid.

Slowly, I extended my arm once more, and, as if it were a signal, the sirens outside shrilled in a hoarse crescendo. The needle approached; I felt a jab in my flesh and my heart leaped sickeningly, then settled into a heavy, frightening pound. A low buzzing gradually filled my ears. The room moved around oddly, and objects in it shifted out of focus. Dimly, I was aware of Santley speaking, his voice very queer and slow, saying something about an address.

I felt a paper thrust into my hand, then, all at once, the full strength of the injection gained control of my body.

I stared around dazedly, confused by the loud buzzing in my ears. There was something odd about the room—

I suddenly realized that the curtain which had billowed at the window was now absolutely motionless. Strange! Puzzled, I turned to the scientist, to see his motionless form poised in a weird, unbalanced position, one arm raised in a frozen gesture toward the door. Into my brain one chilling coherent thought drummed its way: the injection worked—but the antidote was untried!

I turned out into the corridor, moving with what seemed normal speed against a background of deathlike inertia.

ALMOST INSTANTLY I was in the lobby of the building. The buzzing in my head lifted suddenly, and I became aware of silence—thick, heavy silence that draped itself over me like a physical weight. Stunned momentarily, I groped for an explanation; then it came to me that the Doppler Effect was the cause of this, the same slowing of sound waves that lowers the pitch of the whistle on a locomotive as it travels away from one. Literally, I was living away from the sounds of the city! So accelerated were my perceptions in relation to normal phenomena that even closely spaced sound pulses of the highest frequency could not reach me rapidly enough to affect my auditory nerves. Even the shrill, supersonic screech of a brake shoe would not be sound to me!

As my reasoning power adjusted slowly to the unknown, frozen world around me, a vague plan formed in my mind. I knew, above everything else, that I must lose no time. The safety of the city was at stake. I had Murdoch's address. I would go there and wait for him, overpower him and force him to return to the laboratory where he could be injected with the antidote. His punishment could be left to other hands.

The sudden, hollow booming of my heels on the tile floor startled me as I crossed the lobby. I realized that the only sounds which would come to me from the vast, eerie silence would be those created by myself—and Murdoch! A strange sense of foreboding accom-

panied the thought.

Stifling an uneasy doubt, I glanced at the address Santley had given me, pushed open the street door, and stepped out. Motionless shapes stood about everywhere, singly and in little groups, poised in fantastic positions, some with open mouths, their features solidified into grotesque masks. The wildest imaginings of a man locked in a deserted wax museum at night could not have produced the horrible effect this scene created. Strange tableaus, tense with mysterious, suspended action, arrested my eye on all sides.

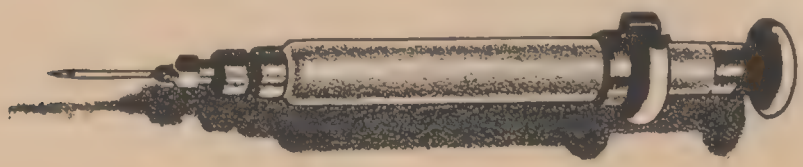
I became aware of a menacing shadow on my left, and whirled to find the red-veined eyes of a huge Negress full upon me, unwinking. Panic overwhelmed me. I fled blindly up the avenue, buildings falling away behind me like telephone poles seen from a fast train. The ghastly silence, the absolute, weird lack of life and motion around me, intensified the sensation of speed, and almost before I was aware of it, the bright lights of the downtown section were behind, and I found myself in an almost deserted neighborhood. The panic ebbed away; glancing curiously around, I realized that I had reached the district wherein Murdoch's house was located.

AS I CAME to a halt, the reverberating echo of my last footstep was quickly smothered by the dead weight of silence. I was now fully aware of the monstrous power wielded by Murdoch, and grimly conscious of the necessity for reaching him at once, I gave myself but a short moment of rest before hastening on.

My way led up a lonely, darkened street that wound deviously away from the main thoroughfare. Deeper and deeper I penetrated into the forbidding gloom, the silence seeming to grow thicker, if possible, after each ringing footfall on the damp flagging. The pavement ended suddenly, and I stopped, vaguely making out the dull bulk of a huge stone mansion that loomed against the sky directly ahead. Murdoch's house!

I groped my way onward, reaching an open gate that gave onto the roadway. More slowly, I continued up an unevenly surfaced drive, forcing back quick fear as I brushed between the thickly overgrown shubbery. I reached the huge stone portico that almost concealed the massive front entrance and stopped again in the shadows, a few feet from the door. Excitement overcame my previous uneasiness as I fumbled for my automatic. I was confident that if Murdoch were in the house I would have little difficulty in capturing him. I put my hand forward in the darkness, and tried the knob of the door. It gave with a slight pressure. Steadily I moved it open until there was just room to pass, then quickly slipped inside.

No sound broke the stillness, and a rank smell swirled into my nostrils as I fumbled for a light, my hand finally striking a switch on the wall. Slowly, mysteriously, a single bulb began to glow in the ceiling, gradually increasing in brightness until the entire room was illuminated by its pale light. A cold chill ran up my spine; then I realized that to my accelerated perceptions the space of time between the turning of the switch and the actual passage of cur-



rent into the bulb was greatly increased. My heart, which had given a quick leap, became normal and I stared curiously around what appeared to be a large reception room.

Unbelievable confusion met my eye. Empty packing crates littered the room, piled deep along the walls. Cans—their contents half emptied—lay about on the floor. There were remnants of food of every description, fruit, meat, bread and pastries, all heaped and strewn in indescribable carelessness and disorder. Slowly, I picked my way through the litter, fresh confusion meeting my eye at every step.

THE LENGTH of time he had had in which to ransack the city was coldly apparent as I passed through room after room, filled with the thickly piled evidence of what must have been thousands of meals. I was forced at last to the conclusion that he was nowhere in the house and a growing apprehension stole over me. What was he doing out there in the silent, helpless city?

I returned to the reception room, feeling panic welling up within me. I knew that I could not wait indefinitely for Murdoch to return. Already I was conscious of hunger—I would be forced to go out to get food. I had seen nothing edible in the house.

As I stood there in the dead silence, a new, paralyzing thought sprang suddenly to mind. What would happen if Murdoch became aware that I was following him? What if he already knew? He could escape me forever in the city!

Perhaps he had seen me moving through the silent throngs, himself simulating immobility! If this was the case, what was to prevent him from stealing upon me unaware, perhaps murdering me in order that his criminal career would be unimpeded? Faced with this gruesome possibility, I became suddenly calm; I began to think furiously.

I saw immediately that I would have to continue to act as though he were yet unaware of my presence; on this premise only could I follow through with any logical plan. I knew that I was powerless if he had already discovered me. I would have to be extremely cautious in my movements.

My eye wandered over the room, lit on an empty plate and inspiration seized me. Food! He would have to eat! The same hunger that gnawed my vitals would force him into restaurants, stores, places where I might catch him if I were clever!

I had a list of all the robberies that had been committed. I drew it from my pocket, studied it carefully. With a sense of exultation I saw that all of them, with the exception of a few remote forays, had occurred within an ever-widening circle, the center of which was Murdoch's house!

Assuming, then, that he had not yet seen me, I might logically reason that he would proceed as in the past, progressively working his way from store to store, restaurant to restaurant, in a constantly enlarging circle, going farther afield only as he exhausted the food supply in each place he visited. That he would require such tremendous quantities of food was hard to believe, but the proof of this surrounded me in the mute evidence of the many crates and empty food containers.

It remained for me to select, then, several places where he might reasonably go in the natural course of events. This was a simple matter—I knew the city well; three restaurants immediately sprang into mind, restaurants which he had not to my knowledge visited, and which were located on the outer fringe of the circle.

With a feeling of triumph, I replaced the paper in my pocket and stole softly out of the house, careful to see that I left no evidence of my passage.

I HAD by this time become somewhat accustomed to the strange silence, but as I stepped out into the night it seemed to close about me thicker than ever, and the slight flush of exultation which I had felt in the house left me. Furtively, I gained the street, and carefully reconnoitered before making my way down to the main thoroughfare. If Murdoch had not yet seen me, certainly I must give him no opportunity now! The success of my plan depended upon his total lack of suspicion.

As I reached the intersection, I peered both ways along the dimly lit, silent stretch of roadway. A few motionless figures caught my eye, and I studied them carefully for a moment before continuing out into the open. There had been no chance for them to see me, yet as I approached them, silently slipping through the shadows, a cold sweat broke out on me. I passed the first, a tall, dark figure in a slouch hat, then whirled quickly, half expecting to detect some betraying motion, perhaps a quick attack. Nothing happened. A shudder of relief dragged itself from my lips as I increased the distance between us.

The motionless forms began to thicken; I was forced to wind my way through them, my heart rising in my throat each time I brushed by a solitary figure. Still, I went on, grimly aware that if one of them was Murdoch, all my planning was useless. By the time I reached the first restaurant I had marked as a possibility, I was in a cold sweat of physical fear. Pausing a moment to conquer my shuddering nerves, I slipped stealthily to the window and peered within.

The dining room was partially filled with diners, all of them, save one, seated in groups of two or three at the tables. I felt sure that Murdoch would not be among these small groups and turned my attention to the lone diner. His back was toward me, and I was satisfied that he could not be simulating the utter immobility with which he held a fork to his lips. Crouching low as I passed the lighted window, I entered quickly and made my way behind a large counter piled high with food. I was ravenous by now, and filling several plates with a variety of food, I placed myself at a table partially concealed behind a pillar, and from which I commanded a view of the entire restaurant, without danger of being seen.

FOR A PERIOD of time I forgot everything in the process of eating; the food was exceptionally delicious to my sharpened senses, and as I finished I uttered a sigh of satisfaction. I started to draw a napkin across my lips, but the act was never completed—just at that moment, from the corner of my eye, I detected a movement to the left of me and froze instantly into immobility, every nerve in my body shrieking a warning.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I turned my head to the left. It was he! It was Murdoch! His insane eyes were fixed on me unwinking, and in them I read certain knowledge. That haggard face, that stubbled beard—how long had he been watching me? I could stand it no longer.

"Murdoch!" The high-ceilinged room echoed as I leaped to my feet with a wild shout and sprang toward him. Amazingly, he moved to meet me—I felt smooth glass beneath my clawing fingers. A mirror!

Then, this wild creature with the burning eyes was myself! I ran a shaking hand over the heavy beard that covered my chin. Had it been that long? Time, I knew, was a creation of my own senses. My gaze fell on the hands of a clock high on the wall; then I knew it could tell me nothing. The error of the clock would be greater than my hundred-thousand-times speeded time elapsed since I had left Santley's laboratory!

How many crimes had been possible to Murdoch during this interval! Quickly, I decided to go back to the house. Perhaps he had returned by now. I ran to the rear entrance of the restaurant, and rushed through a maze of back streets to the forbidding district I had previously visited.

Caution returned as I saw the cold reflection of moonlight from the darkened windows of the house. I entered soundlessly and crept through the noisome place. In a sudden access of panicky rage, I was faced with the knowledge that he had not returned.

I calmed my raw nerves; a crafty plan presented itself, and securing a light, easy-broken string from a paper bag, I stretched it across the front door as I left, so that it would be broken by Murdoch's passage. I would thus easily be able to ascertain if he had arrived during my absence.

Again I made my way by back streets, this time to another eating place on the outer rim, so to speak, of the circle which Murdoch was rapidly enlarging. Again I carefully reconnoitered through the lighted window before entering, satisfying myself that none of the diners present could be Murdoch. As I entered the place, however, I was immediately struck with a new, a baffling atmosphere which I had noticed in none of the other restaurants.

I PAUSED in the shadow of the foyer, my nerves tense, probing the faces of the diners for the second time. Nothing seemed out of place—still I hesitated, my gaze finally coming to rest on the face of a waiter. A slow drumming started in my head—the waiter's face held an odd expression, a strange look of—yes, of bewildered horror. I followed his staring eyes to an unoccupied table and sudden illumination came to me.

The table was piled high with empty dishes and bottles. Someone had eaten there, not one meal, but many; the expression on the waiter's face convinced me that the diner had been Murdoch! With what amazed terror had the waiter slowly become aware of the uncanny phenomenon! Fascinated, I could not tear my eyes away from the heaped dishes. How long ago? How narrowly had I missed him? Grimly I turned and went out. Perhaps at the next restaurant—

How long a time elapsed I did not know. The strange problem of Murdoch engrossed me; I was determined to bring my mission to a successful end, knowing that to admit my defeat was to abandon the entire city to a continuation of the terrifying crimes which had already partially paralyzed business activity.

Restaurant after restaurant I visited, returning time and again to Murdoch's house only to find the string unbroken. In a haze of fatigue I fell asleep once, after a meal in one of the last places on my list. Dazed with weariness and discouraged by my fruitless search, I must have slept much longer than I intended; when I awoke I was aware of faces turned in my direction, filled with bewilderment and fright. How uncanny it must have seemed to them!

Instant realization of the time I had lost jerked me abruptly to my feet. I must find Murdoch. I started to leave, and it was then that the thing I had been waiting for happened! Somebody passed the window of the restaurant! The brief, startling impression of movement recorded itself indelibly on my mind! I knew that it could be no one but Murdoch!

A flood of relief swept me. Obviously, he was unaware of my presence, and this certainty removed the shrinking fear that had haunted me. With renewed determination, I started toward the door, only to come to an exasperated halt.

While I had slept, two diners had

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edged their way to the entrance, completely blocking passage. The knowledge that Murdoch was escaping farther away every second aroused a frenzy in my breast, yet I dreaded to lay hands on them. Finally, in desperation, I rushed to a window, flung it open, and leaped down to the pavement. There was no sign of life in the silent street. I did not dare attempt to follow—he might be lurking nearby, perhaps in the shadow of a shop door. For a few minutes I peered futilely in the direction he had taken, but it was useless; there was no movement as far as the eye could see. I had lost him!

WITH A terrible feeling of despair, I decided that I could no longer continue the search. I would return once more to Murdoch's house; this failing, I would go back to Santley's laboratory and receive the injection antidote. In spite of my dogged unwillingness to admit defeat, I felt a warm glow of anticipation at the thought of the antidote. This terrible solitude—the dread silence—would give way to the pleasant, familiar sights and sounds of normal existence. Sudden longing for a quick return to my natural state hastened my steps, as I went toward Murdoch's house for the last time.

I reached the gloomy driveway, and approached the front door confidently. This last return trip was a formality—a concession to my conscience before returning to Santley's laboratory. Then, as I halted in the gloom of the portico, I saw that the string had been broken!

For the fraction of a second temptation swayed me. It would be so easy to steal silently away, back to the laboratory. No one would ever know. Then sudden sick revulsion seized me as I realized that, in my own mind, I would be directly responsible for every crime that followed! The muscles knotted in my jaw—opening the door softly, I slipped inside the house.

Almost at once, before I could reach the light switch, a sound came to my

ears, prickling the hair on the back of my neck with blind, unreasoning terror. As I stood paralyzed by the door, it came again, a long low moan that seemed to freeze the very blood in my veins. After a long moment, during which dreadful, pregnant silence reigned, I summoned strength to stiffened muscles and grimly forced myself to go forward. The gruesome sound, I knew, had emanated from the next room, which lay directly ahead of me. Through the darkness I crept to the open doorway, then, every nerve rasping, stepped through. My breath left me in a quick gasp.

Over a low fire bent an old man. Dim light from the painted flames sent slow shadows across his wrinkled face, touched the white, unkempt hair that hung in long strands down his back. For what seemed an eternity I stood there, frozen, my throat constricted.

"Murdoch!" I whispered hoarsely, at last.

Filmed old eyes came around, regarded me blankly for a moment, then faint intelligence lit small fires in them. The withered lips cracked, and a sound broke the awful stillness. The voice was almost unrecognizable, creaking and plaintive.

"Food . . . food—" The pitiful sound trailed off and the eyes stared at me beseechingly, wonderingly, like those of a child. Could this wretched creature be the super-criminal, the single man who had been able to perform crime after crime, robbery after robbery, defying the police of an entire city?

WITH SHOCKED comprehension, I realized that the old man was unable to move, weak from lack of nourishment! I rushed back into the outer room and discovered, by some miracle, an unopened can of preserved fruit. A can opener lay at hand; I wrenched the top from the tin and hurried back, placing it before the withered figure by the fire. Before I could turn away to find a spoon, a wrinkled old hand came to sudden, vicious life, seized the can and raised it shakingly to toothless gums. With thirsty gulps and sighs, his throat working painfully, the pitiful wreck devoured the contents. The last drop gone, the empty tin rolled to the floor and I felt, with suddenly renewed fear, a strange burning gaze fixed on me. New strength was in the old man's voice when he broke the silence.

"You talk, you bring me food—you see me!" A wild hope sprang into his voice. "I'm free then; the cursed poison has left my blood at last!" A shaking hand reached out and clutched me by the arm. "Speak to me—tell me I'm free!"

Bewildered, I stared at him blankly. Could he mean the injection? Slowly I shook my head and the skinny hand fell away. A sudden, low gabble broke from the bloodless lips. The old man was laughing, a ghastly, unnatural monotone of mirthless sound that turned my blood to ice.

"Then you . . . you, too, are a victim of the strange injection!"

I drew back in sick horror as the claw-like hand came forward. The horrible laughter ceased abruptly, and I felt the bony fingers digging into my wrist.

"Ah, you draw away, you fear me!" The mirthless cackle welled up again, then died away. "Wait . . . wait till you become as old as I! Wait till your fine body fails, your teeth fall out, your eyes grow dim. No one to help you, to give you medicine, to feed your sick body. I waited—just as you will have to wait—helplessly. A week—two weeks—" A spasm of coughing interrupted his words.

My heart was pounding. What could he mean? I licked dry lips. "Murdoch," I whispered, "why didn't you go back? Why didn't you return to Santley's laboratory? He has the antidote."

The old man stared at me in silence,

and quick, unreasonable panic raced through me.

"Damn you, tell me, why didn't you go back?" I shouted insanely. I seized him by the shoulders and shook him until the dry gums rattled in his throat. Trembling, I released him finally, and he fell back against the wall, sacklike. The old eyes regarded me calmly, without anger or reproach.

"My son," came the weak old voice, "my son"—and there was infinite pity and gentleness in the tones—"God help you, for no one else can." He paused, and as I waited for him to continue, an icy hand seemed to grip my heart. "Many times I returned to the laboratory, each time hoping that in some way I would be enabled to receive the antidote, but it was always the same—I came and went unseen! The antidote is doubtless there, yes, but what doctor can make an injection into a person he does not see?"

I FELT the blood drain slowly from my face. Santley had not thought of that—that no victim of his drug could wait to be seen! He had not known that there would be no escape from the relentless strength of the strange injection! Dully, I realized that I had been sacrificed unintentionally, only to find, instead of a dangerous criminal, a harmless, half-mad old man! In dazed despair I heard Murdoch's voice, weak and far away, as he continued.

"I did not discover at first, as you have, that I was irrevocably doomed to this monstrous, unnatural state. I made no attempt to return to the laboratory immediately, but roamed around the city, equipping myself with whatever took my fancy. Money, jewels, clothes, enough to keep me in luxury for life when I returned to my normal state of being. I remember well the day when I began to tire of the splendid excitement—confident and assured in the knowledge of my wealth, I went to the laboratory, prepared to receive the antidote and return to live a life of ease." He paused, and a dull, pained look crept into his face. "Even then, I could not believe the truth.

"I returned time and again. I forgot the jewels, the money; they were useless to me, as they would be to you. All I desired now was escape, escape from the devilish poison in my blood. But as time passed, and I saw the futility of my position, I became more and more eager to stay here, sheltered by these four walls. Still, the ever-present need for food drove me forth constantly. Each time that I went out, the terrible feeling of frustration became more acute, until, at last, I felt I could no longer bear to see those motionless people—people who I knew were like myself—whose inability to see, to comprehend, drove me into mad, senseless rages, and I hurled myself about in furious fits of insane anger!" His voice dropped. "Thank God—I killed no one—"

I was numb with a nauseated horror. The mysterious attacks which had so puzzled the police were now explained! Coldly, I saw that this would happen to me, too. Would I have the strength of will to control that ghastly frustration, or would I, myself, be the one to commit the very crimes, the murders, I had been sent to forestall? The frightful question engrossed me; I failed to notice that the old man had slumped on the floor. Suddenly a faint murmur drew my eyes in his direction.

"Food . . . food—" His eyes were closed, the lids blue and transparent.

In quick panic I groped around, searching for something to eat, to revive that weak, unearthly voice; but I was unable to find a morsel—the rooms were devoid of food. I hurried back, grasped Murdoch gently by the shoulder.

"Murdoch . . . wait—" I released him suddenly, drew back in fear. His lips moved once, his hand came up

slowly, seeking something. The fingers clutched feebly at the air, a faint draft of sound stirred my senses. Murdoch was dead.

MY GAZE returned to the motionless body of the old man, and my numbed senses dully noted an odd phenomenon. One thin arm was still poised in midair, the palm upward as though beseeching. Suddenly fascinated, I bent over, gazed intently. The arm was rigid—off balance, yet frozen almost erect in the air. In death, Murdoch was free at last of the power of the injection!

Death, then, was the only release!

Blindly, I turned, plunging through those awful rooms out into the night. Through the nightmare city I fled, speeding ever faster in a mad, vain effort to escape the black shadow that paralyzed my thoughts. Mechanically I ate when I became conscious of hunger, then rushed on, through the motionless crowds, wildly hoping to hear a human voice, a laugh—any normal, friendly sound. But the ghastly silence remained unbroken. Gradually my steps slowed. I recognized at last the hideous truth —I was cut off forever from the living world!

An interminable period of time passed. Days—weeks—months. I was conscious of the slow change of the people and groups I passed, but it was meaningless to me. Helpless, I saw my youth slip away under the constant pressure from within. Mirrors held a morbid fascination.

Once, for a brief period, I attempted to create a life for myself. I frequented museums, libraries; I read extensively. But it was useless. From the image of reality produced by a book, it was increasing agony to return to the silent, lifeless world in which I lived. I gave up reading.

I fell into a sort of apathetic state of being, only to be aroused at times into a raging madman when my thoughts reverted to my fate. At these times I would remove myself far from the crowds, dreading subconsciously the

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effect these insane outbursts might have on my actions.

Then, one day, I felt the horror coming on. I was in the heart of the city, surrounded on all sides by motionless figures. A sudden feeling of suffocation swept me. I wanted to lash out at the waxen masks, break them, force them to acknowledge my presence!

I screamed! Screamed and no one heard me! My screams were pitched at a frequency too high for the human ear to record! Shaking with sick horror, my legs refused to support me and I sank to the paving. I knew that I was losing my mind—

Slowly, the body of Murdoch came before my eyes, with its rigid, frozen arm. Release! I wondered why I had not thought of it sooner!

WITH EFFORT I arose and entered a nearby drugstore, selected a bottle from the shelves and returned to Murdoch's house. Subconsciously, I noted that nothing had changed; Murdoch's body still lay on the floor—decomposition had not begun. I only felt slight wonder; in my mind one thought burned. Escape! I arranged myself in a chair, raised the bottle to my lips and drank.

A burning sensation became immediately apparent in my mouth and throat. My heart slowed gradually and my extremities tingled oddly. I waited dully—aconite, I knew, did not affect the brain; all of my faculties would be with me to the last, the dread suffocation that would attack my respiratory nerves.

Then, a small sound intruded itself into the silence—a ticking, very slow at first, yet seeming to increase in speed. My eye fell wonderingly on the pendulum of the clock—it was moving quite perceptibly! For a moment I did not comprehend, then suddenly I struggled desperately to my feet. Yes! Of course! The action of the poison was to slow the pulse beat, reduce the flow of blood through the body. Its effect was to decelerate my reactions, to draw me back to normalcy!

A wild hope sprang in my breast. There was a chance—if only I could reach the laboratory!

Madly I rushed from the house out into the street. Already the silence was lifting, the city was coming to life. I detected the sound of a horn—a train whistle. People were moving, the little wax-museum groups were breaking up slowly, yet with increasing speed, and now I realized with quick horror that my strength had already begun to give out!

Hours seemed to pass, and still I struggled on. Dimly, through my agony, I saw with sudden disbelief the building which housed Santley's laboratory. It seemed impossible that I would ever reach it. Even as I staggered across the lobby I doubted, knowing that every step was torn from the hand of death.

I stood in front of the door and with a final superhuman effort turned the knob and collapsed inside. I saw Santley come toward me swiftly; in my hand was still clutched the bottle of poison, and with a last prayer I dropped it from nerveless fingers. He saw, and a great comprehension came into his face. In a moment I was drinking something, then I felt a tube forced down my throat. My stomach was pumped. The terrible weight on my chest lifted slightly; I felt a jab in my arm, then the room went out of focus as I lost consciousness.

The laboratory was very quiet. A tall, gaunt man was staring at me, his eyes sunken in black sockets. I recognized him finally. It was Santley.

"Where is Murdoch?" he whispered. His voice sounded very clear, yet somehow strange.

I stared at him in amazement. Was it a joke? I searched his face intently, suspiciously.

"Murdoch? Murdoch died three years ago," I said slowly.

STRANGE GATEWAY

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STRANGE GATEWAY

By E. Hoffman Price

There is the gateway of Death that leads beyond, and perhaps another, stranger gateway—

IT IS said that prolonged fasting opens a gateway which is closed to normal senses; that fever or drugs, for instance, can blaze a path across the border of consciousness. But I know that fatigue can open that strange gate. There are lessons that can be learned without understanding, which is perhaps just as well—

The setting sun reddened the barren plateau of Arizona. Sterile crags rose through haze and hell glamour; first they were ruddy buff, then a lurid purple. As the light changed, they became coal-black with threats of fire behind it; and all this glare beat through the windshield, making my eyes burn and sting. I had slept only in winks during the past three days, and now this drive, with no stops except for coffee and gasoline.

I needed money badly, and at once. Grant had several thousand dollars' worth of nuggets in his mountain cabin. He had not answered my letter. Probably it was still at the post office, waiting until he and his wife came to town for supplies. And since I had waited too long for a reply there was nothing to do but head west. Trains were too slow, and planes too expensive.

Finally coolness drove out the blast-furnace wind that had seared my face all day. For a while that lifted the burden of fatigue. Then the increasing elevation made my head swim. I was dizzy, and the chill of a mile above sea level began to bite home. The worst twelve hours were still ahead, for a life depended on my keeping awake.

Not that failure would actually cause my kid brother's death; he'd live, all right. But he'd be a cripple—a helpless twist of scar tissue if he did not get to a specialist, and in a hurry. The furnace explosion that caused the damage was my fault. Just one of those absent-minded omissions, followed by a sheet of flame—

Once I had Grant's hoarded nuggets I could wire the funds back home and quit wondering if the kid might not get a genuine break by not living.

I had not calculated on the tortuous road beyond Last Chance. The lights of the mining town were scarcely behind me when the effects of a quart of strong coffee wore off, and the fight began.

The feeble headlights were none too well focused, which was normal for the four-lunged antique I drove. Slowly, surely, my eyes were glazing from the monotony of following that snaking white center line.

My hands automatically manipulated the wheel, and my foot the brake. This was as it should be, until I became somewhat too unconscious of these movements. My ears were filled with the grumble of the engine. The unvarying note became hypnotic.

Suddenly I found myself halted with the front wheels almost over the edge of a thousand-foot drop. Instinct had failed for a split second, and I had not swung the now heavy wheel in time. My foot had saved me.

I broke out in a sweat, thinking of the next curve, when foot and hand might fail together. The shock aroused me. I was wide awake. The silence frightened me. It was only after several seconds that I realized I had killed the engine.

For some miles I drove on, and not uncomfortably. Then the reserves, which fright had lashed to the surface, began to burn out. Once, perhaps twice, a faster-moving car overtook me. One which approached had fairly blinded me, forcing me to the very edge of the precipice.

The natives drove like madmen, or so it seemed to one keyed to a crawling pace. Haste or no haste, I had to pull up and rest. But parking on this narrow road was not to be considered.

I stared into the darkness, looking for some wide spot used by the highway maintenance crews as gravel dumps. But each time, taken by surprise, I overshot my mark. I passed on, and I could not trust myself to back up, nor to risk a U-turn. Fatigue had become an enemy who patiently waited for my first false move. I could feel the menace. Safety lay in straight movement in my own narrow lane.

I tried to sing, to whistle; anything to keep from sleeping at the wheel. The false recuperation at the last gas stop had kept me from making the rounds of the town to find some caffeine tablets. I was not getting my "second wind." I had no reserves. They had been exhausted during that nerve-racking day and by the sleepless nights that had preceded it.

My eyes glazed. They stared sightlessly at the white line and the winding gray of the pavement. I slowed down to a crawl. Fatigue and anxiety had whipped me. But finally, despite my dim headlights, I spied a wide spot where I could park without risk.

I remember saying "Thank God!"

Likewise, I cut off the engine. Now that there was no danger from exhaust fumes, I raised the window. Then I slumped across the wheel. Of all this I am certain. But to this day I can only guess what followed.

I WAS driving again, and I was not tired. Grant was talking to me from the back seat—though this did not seem strange at the time.

"Of course, the money's there, Bill," he said, answering my question. "When you grubstaked me, pretending you thought I might do a little prospecting while my lungs improved, I took you at your word. Something told me I'd find a couple of pockets. Enough to pay you back."

I don't know just what I replied. I must have inquired about his wife. Women are funny about some things. She might raise merry hell about him handing me three-four thousand dollars —more than I actually needed—when I had staked him to only a couple hundred.

Grant was amused at my qualms. "Irene's not that way! She's been wonderful, sticking through hell and high water. Way up in that lonely little cabin. She thinks you're tops, too. I didn't hide your share to keep it from her. That was just . . . well, so it'd be safe and ready any time you'd accept it."

Months ago I had refused Grant's offer of a cut. True, I had grubstaked him, and according to old mining tradition, fifty percent of take was mine. But I had never believed he'd have any luck. I'd really staked him to a chance to get well. It didn't seem right to accept a profit on such an investment. You can't ever tell when these lungers have a relapse, or need expensive hospitalization.

"Jeff," I said, "you're a godsend, if there ever was one—"

Then, abruptly, my voice became unusually loud. I was driving. I was alone, and I had absolutely no recollec-

tion of having started up the engine, pulled out of that wide spot.

I kicked the brakes. The shock of realizing what I had done left me wide awake. I saw a highway marker. A town was only five miles away. The distance, just before I pulled up to rest, had been over thirty miles.

I had driven that stretch while asleep! That was bad enough, but this was worse: I had retained enough contact with my surroundings to have the illusion of being awake. With this half truth had come an outright hallucination, that of talking with Grant. It seemed now that I had also had a few words with Irene. People, some alive but long forgotten, others long dead, had occasionally made the conversation three-cornered.

That frightened me. Not the conversation, but the fact that my tormented senses had reached a stage when they could trick me to death.

I sat there, woodenly wheeling the car down grade. The road was wider. Presently, before the stimulus of the shock wore off, I was rolling into a town whose name I do not any longer recollect.

There was a restaurant. I went in and called for a bowl of chili and some coffee. The waiter stared at me, particularly when I asked him how far it was to Prescott. Certainly there are many who drive all night. Neither was it my sweat and grease-grimed shirt or dust-caked face; many a truck driver is more disheveled.

The fellow rang up the money and pushed the change at me without a word. I was still a little dazed, despite eating, walking across the street, and resting my eyes from the stupefying white line. The waiter must have seen something in my face which alarmed him.

I mean, he knew, as a dog or cat knows things, that he was looking at a man whose senses were still away from his body. Literally, I was not all there. Some of me must still have been beyond that strange gateway. At the time I did not know how far one can go and still return.

It is good that I did not know— I would have turned back.

MY MIND was working and so were my senses, but very slowly. I drove accordingly. I was fairly bloated with strong coffee, and the strong cigar did its bit. Not the smoke, but the tobacco clamped between my teeth.

The going was better for a while. Getting to Prescott was no great problem. Neither did I have any difficulty in finding the side road that led to Grant's mountain retreat. I was not even dismayed at the thought of the last three miles of one-way trail which I would have to make in low gear once I branched from the secondary highway.

Perhaps the shock and strain had numbed apprehension. At the time it seemed that I had tapped an ultimate reserve. But this was not so. Quite the contrary, as it later developed.

It was nearly four o'clock when I reached the foot of the final ascent. A treacherous grayness blurred everything, and wisps of mist banded the road. Perhaps they were dust haze that had freakishly climbed, though that made no difference. They warped the shapes of stunted trees. Once two headlights loomed up, great yellow blobs, bearing straight at me.

I yelled and pulled over. They swung to meet me. Some fool was not only on the wrong side of the road, but bent on pushing me over the edge. Before I could jump, I realized that a shifting haze band had mirrored my own headlights. Its sudden reaching into a clear space had given me the worst shock of the drive.

It took a moment or two for me to collect myself. I was still shaking when someone said: "Hi, Bill! I got your letter."

Grant's voice. I croaked something that wasn't quite articulate and swung toward the door. My sleeve accidentally caught the headlight switch and snapped it off. In the sudden gloom I could just see him—rather, I could distinguish his shape, the blurred pale blotch of his face.

He said: "When I saw the postmark on your letter, I was sure you'd be here before I could answer. Irene is in Prescott. I had a hunch. I had to come out here to meet you. It seemed crazy, but I didn't want you to get to the cabin and wonder why we weren't there."

I poked out my hand. After that first chat with Grant, miles back, I did not quite know what to make of it all. His voice seemed to talk to my mind rather than my ear. The elevation plays tricks with one's hearing.

He evaded my hand and said: "Easy, Bill! Your grip is too tough! I wrenched my wrist—up there."

He gestured toward the trail I could just distinguish.

"Where's your car?" I groped.

"Back there, in the turnout." He half turned, making a vague gesture. "You're tired as hell. You sound dead on your feet. Go up to the cabin and turn in while I go back to get Irene. I'd've waited at home, but you know how women are about postponing their shopping."

I think I chuckled. I was weaving on my feet, and my ears still hummed from the rumble of the engine. The sound had grown into me. During all those hours it had filled a silence into which nothing else intruded.

Grant did not offer to guide me to the cabin. I knew the way, having helped him truck his luggage up there a year previous. It all seemed natural as anything could, under the circumstances. As I kicked the starter, I heard his voice again: "I'll get Irene—"

Something about that last bit made me shiver. There was nothing for him to laugh about. The bitter note jarred me. Maybe they had quarreled. Solitude might have frayed her nerves.

I did not hear the starting of his car. Mine made too much noise.

"So that's it. Maybe she's left him and he wants to patch things up—temporarily, for appearance's sake."

Fighting the wheel became such a struggle that I began to shake off my dullness. It was not until I lurched over the shoulder of the clearing and saw the weather-beaten cabin in the yellow headlight glow that I knew how thoroughly beaten I was.

I left my suitcase in the back seat. The cabin door swung slowly in the twisting breeze. The hinges creaked. I stumbled in. The letdown of having finally reached the goal made my legs sag. My brain became a chunk of wood. I reeled in the musty darkness. My flashlight was in the car, but I'd drop if I went after it. There were matches in my pocket. Finding them took endless fumbling.

When I did get them the problem was to pick one out and strike it.

The floor was billowing—so I thought, until I sprawled flat. I scarcely felt the shock. An instinctive grab into the gloom brought my hand to the edge of the double-decked bunk in the alcove.

I crawled up to it and flopped in a heap. The blanket was under me. As I clawed about, trying to pull some of it over my shoulders, dust from the folds made me sneeze. That was my final impression. I was in a stupor before I could wonder at Irene's housekeeping—

THERE WAS the usual perplexity that follows awakening in a strange house. I sat up and blinked into the murky gray that thinned all but the farther shadows of the smoke-stained, single-room structure.

"Hell—this is no time to wake up."

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I poked my face into the dusty pillow and got a better arrangement of the blanket. Suddenly I realized that it was not brightening, but becoming darker. I could no longer see the little wood stove in the kitchen corner.

This was not dawn, but dusk!

That brought me to my feet. "Jeff!" I called, blinking and weaving. "Don't worry about waking me. Irene!"

There was no answer. I hurried to the door and saw the last sullen red of sunset. A clothesline, frayed and wind-whipped, trailed from the corner of the cabin. A shred of faded pink chiffon was still pinned to the broken line. Unburied tin cans rusted near the incenerator Grant had made of salvaged sheet iron.

And grass cropped up in the path that led to the steps.

My skin began tingling. I felt as though I had been clubbed just short of unconsciousness. This was a bit too much to digest. Then I said: "They've had a serious tiff, and he doesn't want to come up and tell me about it until he sees he can't dodge it."

I went back into the cabin and struck a match. There was a kerosene lamp on the wall bracket. The bowl was half full. Once I had a light I looked around. I began to think that I might have come to the wrong place. Outside it was too dark to pick any certain landmarks or identifying features.

Inside—well, Irene had put up frilly dotted Swiss curtains. There was a bookcase all filled with Grant's favorites. He was a scholarly chap, and thus isolation had not depressed him. It would be otherwise with Irene.

But why in hell hadn't Grant given me any consideration? Dignified reticence had its limits! He certainly had wit enough to devise a story that would keep me from asking embarrassing questions. I began to realize that I was offering myself far-fetched "reasons" for not giving things a close look.

I could not longer dodge it. Something was wrong, plenty wrong somewhere. He had been too hasty in side-

tracking me. That was out of character. No amount of roughing it would make him so casual and indifferent to a friend's comfort and pressing need. I had never doubted his gratitude. All the more since he had never embarrassed me with fluent expression of it.

But there was food, even if no host. Canned sausages, milk, corn, and the like. Coffee and sugar. A pile of wood was in the corner, and aluminum utensils hung from pegs on the wall.

What I did not like was the dried-out loaf of bread, and the water pail whose inside was ringed, showing the slow dropping of the level as the contents evaporated. This could not be Grant's cabin. It had not been occupied for weeks.

OUTSIDE I heard the gurgling of a spring. I got my flashlight from the car, but I scarcely needed it. The spring was in the familiar location I half remembered. I became more and more uneasy, and my efforts to convince myself that this was the wrong cabin fell flat.

Coffee and a can of beans gave me new life for a little while. I planted myself in a rocker and looked over some of Grant's books. Some of them were on mining. These were new. Theory apparently had helped him make that strike which a few days' work had exhausted. Others were poems and essays, a Bible, and some classics.

There was one which stared at me; a thin, green volume. "Yogi Philosophy," by Ramacharaka. Just why I reached for that, of all things, I don't know. I vaguely knew that this was one of the occult works to which Grant's studious disposition had logically enough turned during his illness. But I had never had the least interest in a subject I considered the specialty of neurotics.

I didn't make much of the first chapter, though I was surprised at the grip and animation Ramacharaka gave to his discussion.

"Death is but an aspect of life, and the destruction of one material form is but a prelude to the building up of another," he wrote.

The way he expressed it, death was no more than a transformation—not an ending. But for our instinct to remain on this "plane," it would have no terror.

The next thing that caught my eye was *"astral body."* But my material body was claiming its due. The pages danced and shimmered before my eyes; I nodded, very much as I had during that long drive. *"—astral body of a dying person is sometimes projected by an earnest desire, and is, at such times, seen by friends with whom he is in sympathy—"*

That scarcely registered. Before stepping toward the bunk, I blinked and read on, not because I was particularly interested, but because the persistence that had so long kept me awake would not relax. *"—astral body is invisible to the ordinary eye—readily perceived by those having clairvoyant power—astral body of a living person may be seen by friends and others—"*

I dropped the book on the table and wondered if Grant's astral body had been talking to me during that thirty-mile stretch I had driven while in my dismaying half sleep.

This time I decided to rest under blankets. I shook them out. A hatchet fell from the folds. No wonder I'd developed more sore spots! I paid no particular attention to it, except that it was rusty. After blowing out the lamp I picked my way to the bed, kicked off my shoes, and rolled in.

There was no point to driving down to Prescott to look for Grant. I did not know where he and Irene were staying, and there was the chance of missing him and causing just that much more delay. And I was still half stupid from exhaustion.

Grant's strange conduct troubled my rest. Indeed, I was far from certain that I actually was asleep. That was natural, having gotten up to get breakfast at dusk—

MY AWAKENING was sudden. The cabin was flooded with light—the kind you see sometimes shining from behind thin clouds. And I was no longer alone. A man lay on the opposite bunk. He was reading a book.

I could not see much of his face; only his forehead, high and tanned, and crisp black hair that was brushed straight back. He was lean and rangy. His hands were long and brown and well shaped. They were familiar as the laced boots he wore. He did not have to lower the green book for me to know that Grant had returned.

I tried to say hello, but couldn't move my lips. It was like trying to yell in a dream and not being able to make a sound. I wanted to say: "When did you get here?" All I could do was shiver and notice that there was no sign of Irene about the cabin.

He did not turn a page, nor glance my way. What gave me my first fright was when closing my eyes failed to shut out anything at all. There was light, though the lamp was not burning. I tried to whip my terror by telling myself that fatigue does the damnedest things to a fellow. Lord knows, I'd learned that on the road.

I wished now that I had searched the cabin, at least tried to find the hoard of nuggets. I didn't want to see Grant or talk to him. If I had been able to move, I'd have gotten out at one bound.

All at once the door slowly opened, an inch at a time. There was no sound now. There should have been, for the hinge was rusty.

The head and shoulders of a woman pushed through. Her hair was red, and her eyes were brown; striking, that combination, with her cream-colored skin. Arizona's dry winds had not seared Irene's loveliness. Her hand at the door jamb was smooth and her nails gleamed red. She had lovely arms, and her slow movement was like a cat.

Her eyes were narrowed and feline, and her red mouth so tight that it marred the sweetness of the face I remembered. I knew now that there had been hell popping between Irene and Grant. He'd stir soon enough.

But she did not come in. Like that she was gone. It was dark outside. While I was still trying to turn and spy her in the gloom, a man came up. He was big and blond and good-looking, in a way; not quite thirty, which made him perhaps ten years younger than Grant.

He had a hatchet in his hand. It looked like the one I had shaken out of the blankets, except that it gleamed. He stood in the doorway for some moments, half crouching, eying Grant. Finally he slunk in, tiptoeing. He had the hatchet behind his back.

By that time I had stopped breathing. I was not even sure that this was real. Too many strange things had come out of that tough drive. I felt like the time I had gotten a lungful of fumes from a copper smelter: too paralyzed to cough or breathe; an invisible strait-jacket binding my chest.

The man at the door jumped. I closed my eyes, but that made no difference. I saw his hatchet sink deep into Grant's head. Blood spurted all over and ran down the open pages of the book. The murderer stood and watched Grant's heels kick up, then slump down.

I couldn't see Grant's face for blood. All I saw was the twitching of his fingers, the gaping of his mouth, the slowing up of the shudder that twisted his lean body.

The blond man picked up the book. Oddly, its covers had not been stained. But I knew now what had stuck some of its back pages together, and why the edges were dark. It was Ramacharaka's

volume, and the slayer carefully replaced it. A strange thing to do at the time—but he did just that.

Perhaps the shock of the killing had numbed him, as anticipation had stupefied me. Then he seized the hatchet by the handle and jerked it from Grant's cloven skull. He stood there, as if wondering whether to wipe it or drop it.

He did that last. That was when Irène came in. Her eyes widened when she saw Grant. Then she laughed crazily, and he stuttered: "I did it."

"Hap, darling!" The sweetness of her voice was horrible. It was worse when he caught her in his arms and she sighed: "I couldn't have done it. I was afraid you couldn't, either!"

He kissed her, and they stood there, swaying drunkenly. She was crying now, and he was stroking her red hair. He must have stained it and her white dress with blood from his hands, but I could not see that.

"What'll we do now?" He stepped back and held her away from him. She was calmer now, and he was shaking. His voice trembled.

"Wrap him up. Bury him, silly. You can't leave him this way."

"Ground's too hard to dig. God, we got to get away."

She caught his shoulder and shook him. "Pull yourself together."

He had forgotten the bottle in his pocket until she took it and said: "Take some more of it!"

Irene deftly folded the stained blanket over Grant. I could see her plain as day; her slim, shapely legs, the frivolous little shoes that must be brand-new or the rough country would have scarred them in a day.

"In that last prospect hole, Hap," she panted, catching the shrouded corpse. "Give me a hand. Quick—before—"

"What'll we tell them?" he asked as they carried Grant to the door.

"Hemorrhage. It often happens to lungers. I told you that. We'll put up a cross." She laughed shrilly as she backed down the single step, and Hap followed her with Grant's feet. "Don't you see, mark the grave, don't hide it!"

I don't know how long they were gone. It was so far beyond reality that I could not judge. I lay there, helpless in that invisible strait-jacket. That they had not noticed me did not seem illogical. After all this, nothing was strange—only horrible.

They came back, and their hands were clean. They had washed at the spring, and Irene was sluicing the floor with a pail of water. Hap was prying into a closet, examining chinks in the wall, poking at loose stones in the fireplace. He was looking for Grant's hoard—for my share, rather.

Irene's hints were futile. Finally Hap wiped his forehead.

"To hell with it! I'm not looking any farther! Let his buddy have it if he comes for it! I've got you—"

Irene gestured. He turned, startled by her change of expression. They both faced me, and for the first time they were aware of my presence. She made wordless sounds, and he licked his lips. They were afraid of me; I had seen it from start to finish.

Maybe the shadows cast by the upper deck of the bunk had hidden me.

Irene screamed: "O-o-o-o-oh—"

Hap dropped to his knees. I've never seen such a fast move. He scooped up the hatchet and hurled it. There was another yell. A yell in the darkness—my own voice. He had missed, and the spell was cracked. The strange light was out. I could move, and I did.

I CURSED like a madman. Any human sound at all would help. Then I controlled myself. The outside silence could mean but one thing: they were creeping up to finish me. My yells had warned them. No mortally wounded man could have set up such a roof-shaking racket.

Irene knew that I had recognized her. She had to be sure I was finished. This fatal logic struck me as clearly as it must have struck the two outside. Had they not been lurking to ambush me there would have been some sound. It is strange how clearly one reasons when nothing is reasonable—but so it is.

One of my enemies was a woman, slender and not tall, but I knew better than to think that that made her less dangerous. Having egged her lover to murder, she would have to save him and herself. So I reached for the hatchet. Luck was with me. I caught it at the first attempt and crept toward the door.

To parley with those mad people would have been folly. I did not want to avoid the clash. What had happened was now a fact, rather than a horror that had held me paralyzed. I could hardly keep from cursing them, from charging out with the weapon that was red with poor Grant's blood.

That gentle, scholarly fellow struck down like a steer. His valiant fight for health ending in a pool of spilled brains. I crept toward the door, silently as they had stalked him.

Then I heard a stealthy crunch of gravel outside. A warning hiss. I could feel their presence. In the gloom I could just distinguish two vague shapes that were not quite abreast. They had hardly more than rounded the bulk of my Ford.

"I don't hear him." Irene could not have realized how far a whisper carried in that thin air. "Not a sign."

Hap's muttered warning silenced her. The gravel whispered and the shadow of a pine blotted them out. I was now at the threshold. Something white shaped itself in the gloom, and nearer than before. Irene's dress, her extended arm. Then I caught a metallic glint.

The tension was too much. I should have waited, but I couldn't. My own voice sounded strange, as though it came from someone else. I don't know what I tried to say; it was a snarl that became a yell as I leaped, and with a lightness beyond any understanding.

I was afraid I was fatally slow. I clearly saw the rising arc of blued metal. But Hap wasn't quick. He had made no sound. I was on him before a spurt of flame tore the shadows. I felt the heat, the stinging of powder on my cheek and throat. The concussion nearly broke my eardrum.

But I was inside his reach. I had moved faster than strained eyes could follow in that light—and I felt the *chunk* of the broad-bitted hatchet going home. He never had a chance to cry out. A second shot blazed wild as the force of my crazy leap carried him with me.

Hap rolled over backward. The slope was steep. Irene screamed, thin and shrill. I felt her soft body recoil before my shoulder. She clawed me once. I wanted to brain her, but the hatchet was buried in Hap's head. I yelled: "You dirty— You—"

The white blur and the warm contact faded. Brush crackled and rocks rattled. There was another wail, and then only a thump—thump—a faint and final thump. At last came a splash from the pool which the spring's slow trickle fed, far down in the ravine.

The last rock had clattered to rest. I was clinging to an exposed root of the pine tree. My failure to seize Irene had kept me from falling down that deadly slope. It was easy enough to pull myself back over the shoulder.

DAWN was already graying. I was sick and shaking, and barely got to the running board of the old Model A. Bit by bit the thinning of the shadows revealed Hap and the pistol he had dropped. His head was as bad as Grant's; I was glad, but I did not like the spectacle.

The growing light revealed forgotten contours of the little shelf which sup-

ported the cabin. It was almost inevitable that Irene and Hap would creep along the dangerous edge to sneak up on me. And, but for my insane counterattack, they would have finished me.

I finally nerved myself to go in and look at the gory room. Then I remembered that they had gone out to dump him into the prospect hole, and put a cross over him. Not far down the gentler part of the slope I saw a cross.

Grass grew about its base! The wind and the biting Arizona sun had weathered the crudely painted name and date: Jefferson L. Grant, June 12, 1897—Oct. 8, 1938. And this was mid-April of the following year.

The whole thing took me minutes to digest. I went into the cabin, and by dim daylight saw its forlorn dustiness; the feminine garments that still hung in a curtained corner; the spatters of dry blood that dotted the blankets of the bunk opposite the one on which Grant had been murdered.

Finally I picked Ramacharaka's book from the table where I had laid it. The final hundred-odd pages were glued together at the edges, and two were stuck face to face with long-dried blood. Somehow what I had seen in the cabin had been—

No, not a dream. Something unreal in any physical sense, yet more than a dream. I now understood my strange paralysis, the eerie light, Grant's immobility as he lay there, reading. This apparition had told me how he had died; it had also warned me against—

I glanced out and saw Hap's body huddled on the ground. That was not illusion. I shuddered, thinking how narrowly I had missed death.

Later I found the money Grant had set aside for me; not nuggets, but in hundred-dollar bills slipped between the pages of books. The treacherous wife and her lover had looked for gold and missed their mark. And when I made my report to the sheriff I learned more.

My letter to Mr. Jefferson L. Grant had been forwarded to Irene. That had worried her and Hap. Worried them

JESSE JAMES RIDES AGAIN

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so much that "something" moved them to try to waylay me. In view of Hap's pistol, the sheriff called my counterattack self-defense. He assured me that I'd not be indicted on Irene's account. Opening Grant's grave clinched my story. A hatchet had split his skull.

"You done right, killing her with Hap. Hell, the coroner'll call it accidental. He'd better."

But I didn't kill Irene. I know now what met me at the road fork, a thousand feet below; I know what Grant meant by saying he was "going to get Irene." He was hammering, in some strange way, on the wedge that my letter had driven into Irene's security. In a way that Ramacharaka perhaps could explain, Grant had called the astral bodies of his wife and her lover to reenact the murder.

Fatigue, as I said, had opened a strange gateway so that I could look over the border, so that at times I crossed it. I don't know how it would have worked out had I not seen Grant. In the end, I am sure, it would have been the same. Perhaps my coming opened a gateway for Grant. For I don't think he was as much moved by vengeance as by the urge to tell me enough to help me when I needed a lift.

There are plenty of answers. Psychologists will offer one set; occultists another. Reasons, finally, don't count for a great deal. All I can say is, even if I knew how, I'd not deliberately open a strange gateway. Once was enough—

"Silent Area"

One of the basic concepts of evolution is that no animal develops any structure or long retains any structure that does not have a useful function; the more highly organized, the more delicate the structure is, the more certain the zoologist can be that that structure is used and needed.

In all the kingdom of life, no structure approaches in degree of specialization, in delicate and sensitive organization, the structure of the human brain-tissues. Yet there is this strange fact; no man uses so much as one quarter of his brain! Cubic inches of brain tissue have been removed in operations, leaving the patient well, all known senses alert, his reasoning ability, his memory, his every mental function active. In fact, seemingly, he is improved—he no longer wastes energy and effort in useless worry.

These are the "silent areas," masses of tissue greater than all the parts of the brain whose functions are known. Seemingly they respond to no sense-message, react to no thought, store no memory, direct no muscles of the body. Seemingly, they are useless.

They are the greater portion of the brain, they are the most highly evolved, highly specialized life-stuff known. A billion years of animal life it took to evolve them. To all we know today, the volume of man's brain that is used is less than the total volume of a dog's brain.

All *known* functions of man can be explained by a tiny portion of the brain. But—

No structure evolves unless it has a use.

DIVIDE AND RULE!

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

"DIVIDE AND RULE!"

By L. Sprague de Camp

Four hundred years hence knighthood flowers again —as the easiest way to keep Man under alien rule!

THE broad Hudson, blue under spring skies, was dotted with sails. The orchards in the valley were aglow with white and purple blossoms. Beyond the river frowned Storm King, not much of a mountain by Western standards, but impressive enough to a York Stater. The landscape blazed with the livid green of young leaves—and Sir Howard van Slyck, second son of the Duke of Poughkeepsie, wished to God he could get at the itch under his breastplate without going to the extreme of dismounting and removing half his armor.

As the huge black gelding plodded along the by-pass that took the Albany Post Road around Peekskill, its rider reflected that he hadn't been too clever in starting out from Ossining fully accoutered. But how was he to know the weather would turn hot so suddenly? The sponge-rubber padding under the plates made the suit suffocatingly hot. Little drops of sweat crawled down his skin; and then, somewhere around Croton, the itch had begun. It seemed to be right under the Van Slyck trademark, which, inlaid in the plastron, was the only ornamentation on an otherwise plain suit. The trade-mark was a red maple leaf in a white circle, with the Van Slyck motto, "Give 'em the works," in a circle around it.

Twice he had absently reached up to scratch, to be recalled to the realities of the situation by the rasp of metal on metal. Maybe a smoke would help him forget it. He opened a compartment in his saddle, took out pipe, tobacco, and lighter, and lit up. (He really preferred cigarettes, but the ashes dribbled down inside his helmet.)

The by-pass swung out over the New York Central tracks. Sir Howard pulled over to his own side to let a six-horse bus clatter past, then walked the gelding over to the edge and looked down. Up the track his eye was caught by the gleam of the brass rings on the ends of the tusks of an elephant pulling a string of little cars; the afternoon freight for New York, he thought. By the smallness of the animal's ears he knew it was the Indian species. Evidently the Central had decided against switching to African elephants. The Pennsylvania used them because they were bigger and faster, but they were also less docile. The Central had tried one out as an experiment the year before; the duke, who was a big stockholder in the Central, had told him about it. On the trial runs the brakeman had been careless and let the lead car bump the elephant's hind legs, whereupon the animal had pulled two cars off the track and would have killed the chairman of the board if it had been able to catch him.

Sir Howard resumed his way north, relieved to note that the itch had stopped. At the intersection of the by-pass with the connecting road to the Bronx Parkway he drew rein again. Something was coming down the road in long, parabolic leaps. He knew what

that meant. With a grunt of annoyance he heaved himself out of the saddle. As the thing drew near he took the pipe out of his mouth and flipped his right arm up in salute.

The thing, which looked rather like a kangaroo wearing a football helmet, shot by without apparently looking at him. Sir Howard had heard of sad cases of people who had neglected to salute hoppers because they thought they weren't looking at them. He felt no particular resentment at having to salute the creature. After all, he'd been doing it all his life. Such irritation as he felt was merely at the idea of having to hoist his own two hundred and ten pounds, plus forty pounds of chrome-nickel steel plate back on his tall mount on a hot day.

SEVEN MILES up the Post Road lay Castle Peekskill, and Sir Howard fully intended to sponge a dinner and a night's sleep off his neighbor. Halfway up the winding road he heard a musical toot. He pulled off the asphalt; a long black torpedo on wheels was swooping up the grade behind him. He unshipped the duralumin lance from its boot, and as the car whizzed past, the maple-leaf flag of the Van Slycks fluttered down in an arc. He got a glimpse of the occupants: four hoppers, their heads looking rather like those of giant rats under the inevitable helmets. Luckily you didn't have to dismount for hoppers in power vehicles; they went by too fast for such a rule to be practical. Sir Howard wondered—as had many others—what it would be like to travel in a power vehicle. Of course there was an easy way to find out: just break a hopper law. Unfortunately, the ride received in that way was a strictly one-way affair.

Oh, well, no doubt God had known what He was about when He had made the rule allowing nobody but hoppers to have power vehicles and explosives and things. Man had been very wicked, so God had sent the hoppers to rule over him. At least that was what you learned in school. His brother Frank had doubts; had, very secretly, confided them to Sir Howard. Frank even said that once Man had had his own power vehicles. He didn't know about that; the hoppers knew a terrible lot, and if that had been so they'd have had it so taught in the schools. Still, Frank was smart, and what he said wasn't to be laughed off. Frank was a queer duck, always poking around old papers after useless bits of knowledge. Sir Howard wondered how it was that he got on so well with his skinny little elder brother, with whom he had so little in common. He certainly hoped nothing would happen to Frank before the old man was gathered unto his fathers. He'd hate to have the management of the duchy around his neck, at least just yet. He was having too much fun.

He swung off the road when Castle Peekskill appeared over the treetops, near the site of the old village of Garrison. He stopped before the gate and blew a whistle. The gatekeeper popped out of the tower with his usual singsong of: "Who are you and what do you seek?" Then he said: "Oh, it's you, Sir Howard. I'll tell Lord Peekskill you're here." And presently the gate—a huge slab of reinforced concrete hinged at the bottom—swung out from the wall and down.

John Kearton—Baron Peekskill—was in the courtyard as Sir Howard's horse went *plop-plop* over the concrete. He had evidently just come in from a try for a pheasant, as he wore an old leather jacket and very muddy boots and leaned on a light crossbow.

"Howard, my boy!" he shouted. He was a short man, rather stout, with reddish-brown hair and beard. "Get out of your tinware and into your store clothes. Here, Lloyd, take Sir Howard's duffel bag to the first guest room. You'll stay overnight with us, won't

you? Of course you will! I want to hear about the war. WABC had an announcer at the Battle of Mount Kisco, but he saw a couple of the Connecticut horses coming toward him and pulled foot. After that all we could hear was the sound of his horse going hell for leather back to Ossining."

"I'll be glad to stay," said Sir Howard. "If I'm not putting you out—"

"No, no, not a bit of it. You've got that same horse still, I see. I like entires better for war horses myself."

"They may have more pep," admitted the knight, "but this old fellow does what I want him to, which is the main thing. Three years ago he took third in his class at the White Plains show. That was before he got those scars. But take a look at this saddle; it's a new and very special model. See: built-in radio, compartments in the cantle for your things, and everything. Got it at a discount, too."

Sir Howard clanked upstairs after his host. The transparent lucite visor of his burganet was already up; he unlatched the bib and pushed it up, too, then carefully wriggled his head out of the helmet. His square, craggy face bore the little beard and mustache affected by his class. His nose was not all that a nose should be, as the result of an encounter with the business end of a billhook. But he had refused to have it plasticized back into shape, on the ground that he could expect more than one broken nose in his life, and the surgery would, therefore, be a waste of money. His inky-black hair covered a highly developed brain, somewhat rusty from disuse. When you could knock any man in the duchy out of his saddle, and drink any man in the duchy under the table, and had a way with the girls, there were few stimuli to heavy thinking.

PEEKSKILL remarked: "That's a nice suit you have. What is it, a Packard?"

"Yeah," replied Sir Howard, pulling off a rerebrace. "It's several years old; I suppose I'll have to trade it in for a new model one of these days. The only trouble is that new suits cost money. What do you think of the new Ford?"

"Hm-m-m—I dunno. I'm not sure I like that all-lucite helmet. It does give you vision in all directions. But if they make it thick enough to stop a poleax, it'll make you top-heavy, I think. And the lucite gets scratched and nicked up so quickly, especially in a fight."

"Let's see your kicker, John," said Sir Howard, reaching for the crossbow. "Marlin, isn't it?"

"No, Winchester, last year's. I had my armorer take off that damned windage adjustment, which I never used, anyway. That's why it looks different. But let's hear about the war. The papers gave us just the bare facts."

"Oh, there wasn't much to it," said Sir Howard with exaggerated indifference. "I killed a man. Funny: I've been in six fights, and that was the first time I really knew I'd gotten one of the enemy. I'm not counting that bandit fellow we caught up at Staatsburg. You know how it is in a fight: everybody's hitting at you and vice versa, and you don't have time to see what damage you've done.

"I shouldn't claim much credit for this killing, though. I signed up at Ossining because the city manager's a cousin of mine, and they pay well. The C. M. collected a couple of hundred heavy horses from lower Westchester, and he had the commons of Ossining and Tarrytown for pikes. He'd heard that Danbury was going to get a contingent of heavy horses from Torrington. So he put us in two groups, lances in the front only. I was in the second, so they made me leave my toothpick behind. That's a nice little sticker, by the way; Hamilton Standard made it.

"We found them just this side of Mount Kisco. Our scouts flushed an

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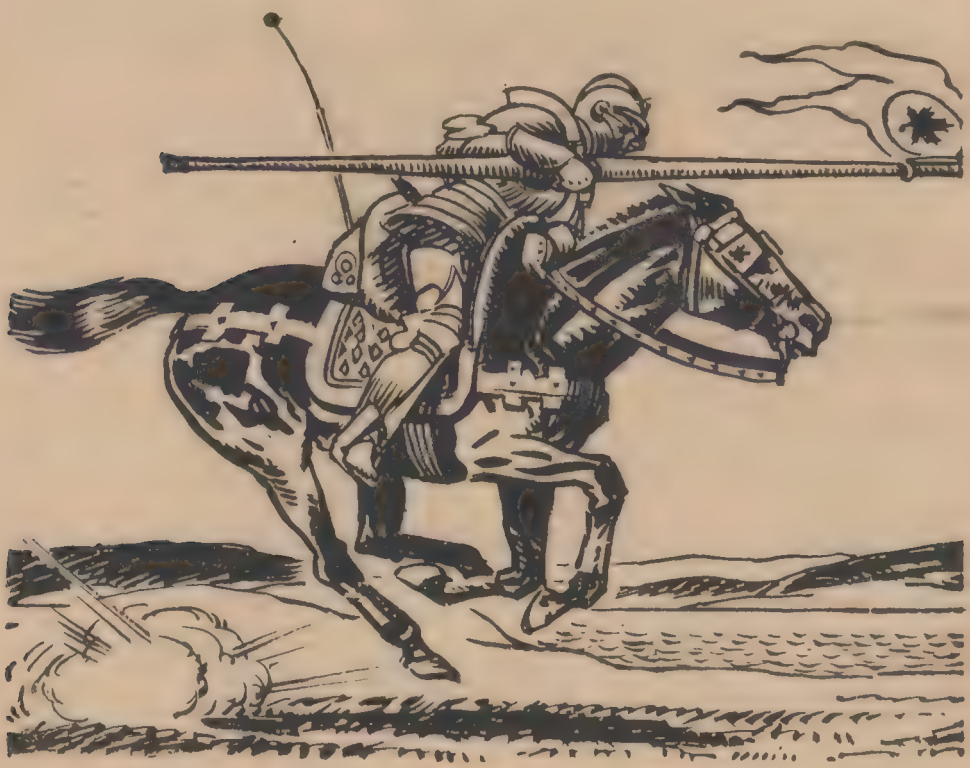
ambush, very neat; chevaux-de-frisse at the far end, horses on either side, crossbows behind every bush. The C. M. swung us south to smash one of their bodies of horses before the other could come up. When we shook out and charged, their left wing scattered without waiting for us as if six devils with green ears were after them. I couldn't see anything because of the lances in front of my group. But the ground's pretty rough, you know, and you can't keep a nicely dressed line. The first thing I knew was when something went *bong* on my helmet, and these red-shirted chaps with spiked helmets and shields were all around me, poking at the joints in my suit. They were Danbury's right wing. He hadn't been able to get any heavy horses, after all, but he seemed to have enlisted all the light horses in Connecticut. They were crab-suited, with chain pants hanging down from their cuirasses.

"I swung at a couple of them, but they were out of reach each time before the ax got there. Then Paul Jones almost stepped on a couple of dismounted red-shirts. I chopped at one, but he got his shield up in time. And before I could recover, the other one, who didn't have a shield, grabbed the shaft in both hands and tried to take it away from me. I was afraid to let go for fear he'd kill my horse before I could get my sword out. And while we were having our tug-of-war, some crab on the other side of me—the left side—grabbed my



ankle and shoved it up. Of course, I went out of the saddle as pretty as a pay check, right on top of this chap who wanted my ax.

"I couldn't see anything for a few minutes because I had my head in a bush. When I got up on my knees there weren't any more red-shirts in sight. They'd found us pretty hard nuts to crack, and when they saw the pikes coming they beat it. I found I still had hold of the ax. The Danburian was underneath me, and the spike on the end of the shaft was driven under his chin and up into his head. He was as dead as last year's treaties. They had about half a dozen killed in that brush; we lost one man—thrust under the armpit—and had a couple of horses killed by kicker bolts. We took their dismounted horse and some of their crossbows prisoner. I climbed back on Paul Jones and joined up with the chase. We couldn't catch them, naturally. We chased 'em clear to Danbury Castle, and when we got there they were inside thumbing their noses and shooting at us with ballistae.

"We sat outside for a couple of weeks, but they had enough canned stuff for years, and threatening a seventy-foot concrete wall doesn't get you anywhere. So finally the C. M. and Danbury agreed to submit their argument about road tolls to a hopper court, and we went back to Ossining for our pay."

DURING his story Sir Howard had gotten out of his armor and into his ordi-

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nary clothes. It was pleasant to sprawl in the freedom of tweed and linen, with a tall glass in your hand, and watch the sun drop behind Storm King. "Of course, it might have been different"—his voice dropped till it was barely audible—"if we'd had guns."

Peekskill started. "Don't say such things, my boy. Don't even think them. If *they* found out—" He shuddered a little and took a big gulp of his highball.

A flunky entered and announced: "My lord, Squire Matthews, with a message from Sir Humphrey Goldberg."

Peekskill frowned. "What's this? Why couldn't he have written me a letter? Come on, Howard, let's see what he wants."

They found the squire in the hall, looking grimly polite. He bowed stiffly, and said with exaggerated distinctness: "My Lord Peekskill, Sir Humphrey Goldberg sends his compliments, and wants to know what the hell your lordship meant by calling him a double-crossing, dog-faced baboon in the Red Bear Inn last night!"

"Oh, dear," sighed the baron. "Tell Sir Humphrey that first, I deny calling him any such name; and second, if I did call him that, I was drunk at the time; and third, even if I wasn't drunk I'm sorry now, and ask him to have dinner here tonight."

The squire bowed again and went, his riding boots clicking on the tiles. "Hump's all right," said Peekskill, "only we've been having a little argument about my electric-light plant. He says it ruins his radio reception. But I think we can fix it up. Besides, he's a better swordsman than I am. Let's finish our drinks in the library."

They had just settled when a boy in a Western Union uniform was ushered in. He looked from one to the other; then went up to Sir Howard. "You Van Slyck?" he asked, shifting his gum to one cheek. "O. K. I been tryin' to find ya. Here, sign, please."

"Manners!" roared the baron. The

boy looked startled, then irked. He bowed very low and said: "Sir Howard van Slyck, will your gorgeous highness deign to sign this . . . this humble document?"

Both men were looking angry now, but Sir Howard signed without further words. When the boy had gone, he said: "Some of these commoners are too damn fresh nowadays."

"Yes," replied his host, "they need a bit of knocking around now and then to remind them of their place. Why . . . what's the matter, Howard? Something wrong? Your father?"

"No. My brother Frank. The hoppers arrested him last night. He was tried this morning, condemned, and burned this afternoon.

"The charge was scientific research."

II.

"YOU'D better pull yourself together, Howard."

"I'm all right, John."

"Well, you'd better not drink any more of that stuff."

"I'm O. K., I tell you. I'm not drunk. I can't get drunk; I've tried. Right now I haven't even a little buzz on."

"Listen, Howard, use your head. Lord knows I'm glad to have you stay around here as long as you like, but don't you think you ought to see your father?"

"My father? Good God, I'd forgotten about him! I *am* a louse, John. A dirty louse. The dirtiest louse that ever—"

"Here, none of that, my boy. Now drink this; it'll clear your head. And get your suit on.

"Lloyd! Hey, *Lloyd!* Fetch Sir Howard's armor. No, you idiot, I don't care if you haven't finished shining it. Get it!"

SIR HOWARD spoke hesitantly; he wasn't sure how his father would take his proposal. He wasn't sure himself it was quite the right thing to do. But the old man's reaction surprised him. "Yes," he said in his tired voice, "I think that's a good idea. Get away from here for a few months. When I'm gone you'll be duke, now, and you won't have many chances to go gallivanting. So you ought to make the most of what you have. And you've never seen much of the country except between here and New York. Travel's broadening, they say. Don't worry about me; I have enough to do to keep two men busy.

"I'll ask just one thing, and that is that you don't go joining up in any more of these local wars. It's you I've always worried about, not Frank, and I don't want any more of that. I don't care how good the pay is. I know you're a mercenary young rascal; I like that, because I don't have to worry about your bankrupting the duchy. But if you really want to make money, you can try your hand at running the Poughkeepsie Shoe Co. when you get back."

THUS it came about that Sir Howard again found himself riding north, and to his own mild surprise doing some heavy thinking. Luckily the hoppers hadn't made much red tape about the travel permit. But he knew they'd keep an eye on him. Even though he hadn't done anything, he'd be on their suspicious list because of his brother. He'd have to be careful.

Jogging along, you had plenty of time to think. He knew he had the reputation of being simply a large, energetic, and rather empty-headed young man with a taste for action. It was time he put something in that head, if only because of the prospect of inheriting the duchy.

He felt that something must be wrong with his picture of the world. In it the burning of people for scientific research was just. But he didn't feel that Frank's death had been just. In it, whatever the hoppers said was right, because God

had set them over Man. It was right that he, Howard van Slyck, should salute the hoppers. Didn't the commoners have to salute him in return? That made it fair all around. He was bound to obey the hoppers; the commoners were bound to obey him. It was all explained to you in school. The hoppers likewise were under obligation to God to command him, and he the commoners. Again, perfectly fair.

Only there must be something wrong with it. He couldn't see any flaw in the reasoning he'd been taught; it all fitted together like a suit of Chrysler super-heavy silico-manganese steel plate. But there must be a flaw somewhere. If he traveled, and kept his eyes open, and asked questions, maybe he could find it. Perhaps somebody had a book that would shed light on the question. The only books he'd come across were either fairy tales about the daring deeds of dauntless knights, which bored him, or simple texts on how to run a savings bank or assemble a cream separator, which were all right if you intended to run a savings bank or assemble a cream separator.

He might even learn to associate with commoners and find out how they looked at things. Sir Howard was not, considering his background, especially class conscious; the commoners were all right, and some were even good fellows, if you didn't let them get too familiar or think they were as good as you. What he had in mind was, for one of his class, a radical departure from the norm.

He squirmed in his lobster shell and wished he could scratch through the plate. Damn, he must have picked up some bugs at Poughkeepsie Manor, free of vermin though it was normally kept. That was the hoppers' fault.

IT BEGAN to rain; one of those vigorous York State spring rains that might last an hour or a week. Sir Howard got out his poncho and put his head through the slit in the middle. He didn't worry about his plate, because it had been well vaselined. But the rain, which was coming down really hard, was a nuisance. With his visor up it spattered against his face; with it down, he had to wipe the lucite constantly to see where he was going. Below the poncho, the water worked into his leg joints and made his legs feel cold and clammy. Paul Jones didn't like it, either; he plodded along with his head drooping, breaking into periodic trots only with reluctance.

Sir Howard was not in the best of humors when, an hour later, the rain slackened to a misty drizzle through which the far shore of the Hudson could barely be made out. He was approaching the Rip van Winkle Bridge when somebody on a horse in front of him yelled "Hey!"

Sir Howard thought he wanted more room. But the strange rider sat where he was and shouted: "Thought I'd skip the country, didn'tcha? Well, I been laying for you, and now you're gonna get yours!"

From his costume the man was obviously a foreigner. His legs were incased in some sort of leather trousers with a wide flap on each leg. "What the hell do you mean?" answered the knight.

"You know what I mean, you yellow-bellied bastitch. You gonna fight like a man, or do I have to take your breeches down and paddle you?"

Sir Howard was too cold and wet and bebugged to carry on this lunatic argument, especially as he could see the town of Catskill—where there would be fires and whiskey—across the river. "O. K., foreigner, you asked for it. Have at you, base-born!" The lance came out of its boot and was lowered to horizontal. The gelding's hoofs thundered on the asphalt.

The stranger had thrown his sheepskin jacket into the ditch, revealing a shirt of chain, and sent his wide-

brimmed hat scaling after it, showing a steel skullcap. Sir Howard, slamming down his visor, wondered what form of attack he was going to use; he hadn't drawn the curved saber that clanked from his saddle. With that light horse he'd probably try to dodge the lance point at the last minute—

The light horse dodged; the knight swung his lance; the dodge had been a feint and the foreigner was safely past his point on his left side. Sir Howard had a fleeting glimpse of a long loop of rope whirling about the man's head, and then something caught him around the neck. The world whirled, and the asphalt came up and hit him with a terrific clatter.

To get up in full armor, you had to be on your stomach and work your knees up under you. He rolled over and started to scramble up—and was jerked headlong. The stranger had twisted his rope around a projection on his saddle. The horse kept the rope taut; every time the knight got to his knees it took a step or two and pulled him down again. When he was down he couldn't see what was happening. Something caught his sword arm before he had a chance to get his weapon out. Rolling, he saw that the stranger had thrown another noose around his arm. And down this second rope loops came snaking to bind his other arms, his legs, his neck, until he was trussed like a fawn.

"NOW," said the foreigner, coming toward him with a hunting knife in his hand, "let's see how you get into one of these stovepipe suits—" He pushed the visor up and gasped. "Sa-a-ay, you ain't the guy at all!"

"What guy?" snarled Sir Howard.

"The guy what ducked me in the horse trough. Big guy named Baker, over in Catskill. Your suit's like his, and you ride the same kind of critter. I thought sure it was him; I couldn't see your face with the helmet on in this bad light. It's all a mistake; I'm sure sorry as all hell, mister. You won't be mad if I let you up, will you?"

Sir Howard conceded that he wouldn't be mad; the fact was that with his anger at his ignominious overthrow by this wild foreigner's unfair fighting methods he had mixed a grudging admiration for the man's skill and a great curiosity as to how it had been accomplished.

The stranger was a lean person with straw-colored hair, some years older than Sir Howard. As he undid the rope he explained: "My name's Haas; Lyman Haas. I come from out Wyoming way; you know, the Far West. Most folks around here never heard of Wyoming. I was having a quiet drink in Catskill last night at Lukas's Bar and Grill, and this here Baker comes up and picks an argument. I'm a peaceable man, but they's some things I don't like. Anyway, when it came to the punch, this Baker and two of his friends jump me, and they ducked me in the horse trough, like I told you. I see now why I mistook you for him: you had your trade-mark covered up under that poncho. His is a fox's head. This'll be a lesson to me never to kill nobody again before I'm sure who he is. I hope I didn't dent your nice suit on the pavement."

"That's all right. A few dents more or less won't matter to this old suit. It's partly my fault, too. I should have thought of the poncho."

Haas was staring at the Van Slyck trade-mark and moving his lips. "Give . . . 'em . . . the . . . works," he read slowly. "What's it mean?"

"That's an expression they used a long time ago, meaning 'Hit them with all you've got,' or something like that. Say, Mr. Haas, I'd like to get somewhere where I can dry out. And I wouldn't mind a drink. Can you recommend a place in Catskill?"

"Sure; I know a good place. And a drink wouldn't hurt either of us."

"Fine. I've also got to buy some insect powder. And when that's been attended to, perhaps we can do something about your Mr. Baker."

The next morning the good citizens of Catskill were astonished to see the person of Squire Baker, naked and painted in an obscene manner, dangling by his wrists and ankles from a lamppost near the main intersection. As he was quite high up and had been efficiently gagged, he was not noticed until broad daylight. Baker never lived the incident down; a few months later he left Catskill and shipped on a schooner in the chicle-and-banana trade to Central America.

III.

"SAY, HOW, I'd kinda like to hear some music."

Sir Howard had not gotten used to Haas' calling him "How." He liked the man, but couldn't quite make him out. In some ways he acted like a commoner. If he were, the knight thought he ought to resent his familiarity. But there were other things—Haas' self-possession, for instance. Oh, well, no doubt the scheme of social stratification was different out West. He turned the radio on.

"That's a neat little thing you got," Haas continued.

"Yep; it's nice when you're making a long ride. There's an aërial contact built into the lance boot, so this little toothpick acts as an aërial. Or, if I'm not carrying a lance, I can clip the aërial lead to my suit, which works almost as well as the lance."

"Is they a battery in the saddle?"

"Yes, just a little light battery. *They* have a real fuel battery, but they don't let us use it."

They topped a rise, and Albany's State Office Building came in sight. It was by far the tallest building in the city, none of the rest of which was yet visible. Some said it had been built long ago, when York State was a single governmental entity and not just a vague geographical designation. Now, of course, it was hopper headquarters for a whole upstate region. Sir Howard thought the dark, square-topped tower looked sinister. But it didn't become a knight to voice such timid vagaries. He asked Haas: "How is it that you're so far from home?"

"Oh, I wanted to see New York. You been to New York, I suppose?"

"Yes, often. I've never been very far upstate, though."

"That was the main thing. Of course, they was that guy—"

"Yes? Go on; you can trust me."

"Well—I don't suppose it'll do no harm, this being a long way from Wyoming. Him and me was arguing in a bar. Now, I'm a peaceable man, but they's some words I don't like, and this guy didn't smile when he said 'em, either. So we had it out in the alley with sabers. Only he had friends. That'll be a lesson to me, to make sure whether a guy has friends first before I fight him. I wanted to see New York, anyway, so here I am. When I run out of money on the way, I'd make a stake going rope tricks in the theaters. I made about six hundred clinkers in New York last week. It's purty near gone now, but I can make some more. They ain't nobody around these parts knows how to use a rope."

"Why," said Sir Howard, "what became of it? Were you robbed?"

"Nope; just spent it." The airy way in which this was said made Sir Howard shudder. The Westerner looked at him narrowly, with a trace of a smile. "You know," he said, "I always had the idea that lords and knights and such were purty free with their wallpaper; threw it around like it wasn't nothing. And here you're the carefulest guy with his money I ever did see. It just shows you."

"How did you like New York?" asked the knight.

"PURTY good; there's lots of things to see. I made friends with a guy who works in a furniture factory, and he took me around. I liked to see the chairs and things come buzzing down the assembly line. My friend couldn't get me into the power plant though. They was a hopper guard at the door. They don't let nobody in there except a few

old employees and I hear they examine them with this dope they got every week to make sure they haven't told nobody how the power machinery works.

"But I got tired of it after a few weeks. Too many hoppers. They get on my nerves, always looking at you with those little black eyes like they was reading your mind. Some says they can, too. I guess after what you told me about your brother it's safe for me to say what I think of 'em. I don't like 'em."

"Don't they have hoppers out West, too?"

"Sure, we got some, but they don't bother us much. What they say goes, of course, but they let us alone as long as we mind our business and pay our hopperage. They don't like the climate —too dry."

"They don't interfere too much in our local affairs, either," said the knight, "except that the big cities like New York are under their direct rule. That's how there are so many down there. Of course, if you—but I've already told you about that."

"Yeah. And it's a crime the prices you pay for steaks around here. Out in Wyoming, where we raise the critters, we eat mostly that. It's the hopperage charges, and all these little boundary tolls and tariffs between here and there makes 'em so expensive."

"Do you have wars out West, too?"

"Sure, once and a while us and the Novvos gets in a scrap."

"The Novvos?"

"Folks who live down south of us. Stock raisers, mostly. They ain't like us; got sorta reddish-brown skins, like Queenie here, and flat faces. Hair as black as yours, too."

"I think I've heard of these people," said the knight. "We had a man at the manor last year who'd been out West. But he called these red-skinned people Injuns."

"That a fact? I always thought an Injun was what made the hopper cars and flying machines go. It just shows you. Anyhow, we get in a fight with the Novvos about grazing rights and such, now and then. Mostly mounted-archery stuff. I'm purty good at it myself. See." He unfastened the flap of an elongated box that hung from his saddle, which proved to be a quiver. He took out the two halves of a steel bow. "Wish I had one of those trick saddles like yours to pack my stuff in, 'steada hanging it all over till me and my horse looks like a Christmas tree. But I travel purty light, at that. You got to, when you only got one little horse like Queenie. I suppose that high cantle's mostly to keep you from getting shoved off the horse's rump by some guy's toothpick." Haas had been fitting the halves of the bow together. The bow had a sighting apparatus just above the grip.

"See the knot in that big pine? Now watch. *Yeeow!*" The mare jumped forward. Haas whipped an arrow from his quiver; the bow twanged. The Westerner swung his mount back, walked her up to the tree, and pulled the arrow out of the knot. "Maybe I shouldn't 'a' done that," he said. "We're getting purty close in to Albany, and maybe they got a regulation about shooting arrows inside the city limits. What's they to see in Albany?" One of the hoppers' hexagonal glassy dwellings had come into view among the old two-story frame houses.

"Not much," replied the knight. "The first thing I have to do is to go to the Office Building and have my travel permit stamped. How about you?"

"Oh, mine ain't that kind. I had it stamped in New York, and now I don't have to report to the hoppers again till I get out to Chicago. But I'll tag along with you. Far's I can see they ain't neither of us got to get anywheres in particular."

THEY WAITED on the sidewalk in front of the Office Building for a quarter of an hour before they had a chance to go in, for, of course, they couldn't precede a hopper through the doors. By that time Sir Howard's steel-clad arm ached from saluting. A pair of the things passed him, chattering in their own incomprehensible tongue, which sounded like the twittering of birds. They smelled like very ripe cheese. He was startled to hear one of them suddenly switch to English. "Man!" it squeaked. "Why did you not salute?"

Sir Howard looked around, and saw that it was addressing Haas, who was standing stupidly with a cigarette in his mouth and a lighter in his hand. He pulled himself together, put away the smoking things, and took off his hat. "I'm sure sorry as all hell, your excellency, but I'm afraid I wasn't looking."

"Control your language, Man," the hopper twittered. "Being sorry is no excuse. You know there is a five-dollar fine for not saluting."

"Yes, your excellency. Thanks, your excellency, for reminding me."

"Smoking is forbidden inside anyway," the thing chirped. "But since you have assumed a more respectful attitude I shall not pursue the matter further. That is all, Man."

"Thank you, your excellency." Haas put his hat back on and followed Sir Howard into the building. The knight heard him mutter, "I'm a peaceable man, *but—*"

Sir Howard found a man with a drooping white mustache at the travel-permit counter, who stamped his permit and entered his visit without comment. The man had the nervous, hangdog air that people got working around hoppers.

As they headed back to where their horses were tethered, Haas said, very low: "Say, How, do you reckon that hopper that bawled me out was showing off to his girl friend?"

"They don't have girl friends, Lyman," replied Sir Howard. "They

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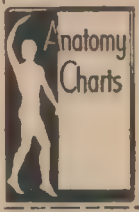

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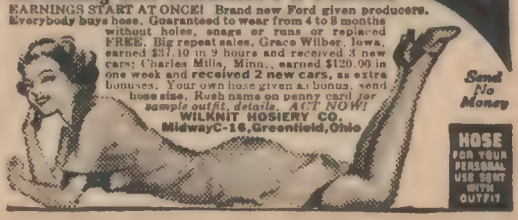

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don't have sexes. Or rather, each one of them, is both male and female. It takes two to produce a crop of eggs, but they both lay them. Hermaphroditic, they call it."

Haas stared at him. "You mean they—" He doubled over, guffawing and slapping his chaps. "Boy, wouldn't I like to have a couple of 'em in a cage!"

IV.

"LET'S eat here, How; we can watch the railroad out the window. I like to see the elephants go by."

"O. K., Lyman. I guess this is about as good as any place in Amsterdam."

At the bar, men made way respectfully for the suit of armor. "Two Manhattans," ordered Sir Howard.

"Straws, sir?" asked the barkeeper.

"Nope," mumbled the knight, struggling with his helmet. "At least, not if I can get this thing out of the way. Ah!" The bib came up finally. "I'll have to take the damned hat apart and clean it properly one of these days. The hinge is as dirty as a secondhand hog wallow."

"You know, How," said Haas, "that's one reason I never liked those iron hats much. For wearing, that is; I don't say nothing against them for flowerpots. I always figured, suppose a guy was to offer me a drink, sudden, and I had to wrassle all those visors and trapdoors and things out of the way. When I got ready to drink, the guy might have changed his mind." He took a sip and sighed happily. "You Yanks sure know how to mix cocktails. Out in Wyoming the cocktails are so lousy we take our poison mostly straight.

"It's a right handsome river, this Mohawk," he continued. "Wish I could say the same for some of the towns along it. I come up from New York through Connecticut; they got some real pretty towns in Connecticut. But the river's O. K. I like to watch the canal boats. Those canal-boat drivers sure know how to handle their horses."

Somebody down the bar said loudly: "I still claim it ain't decent!" Heads were turned toward him. Somebody shushed him, but he went on: "We all know he's been doing it for years, but he don't have to wave it in our faces like that. He might have taken her around a back alley, 'stead of dragging her right down the main street."

"Who dragged whom down what street?" Sir Howard asked a neighbor.

"Kelly's been girl-ing again," the man replied. "Only this time he had his gang grab her right here in town. Then they tied her on a horse, and Kelly led the procession right through the heart of town. I saw it; she sat up very straight on the horse, like a soldier. She couldn't say anything on account of the gag, of course. The people were sore. I think if somebody'd had a can opener he'd have taken a crack at Kelly, even though he had his lobsters with him. I would have."

"Huh?" said Haas blankly.

"He means," the knight explained, "that if he'd had a billhook or a poleax he'd have gone for this Kelly, in spite of his having a gang of full-armored men at his back. A half-armored man is a crab."

"You use some of the dangedest English here in the East," said Haas. "Who's this Kelly? Sounds kinda tough."

Their informant looked at Haas' clothes and Sir Howard's trade-mark. "Strangers, aren't you? Warren Kelly's tough, all right. He sells the townspeople 'protection.' You know, pay up or else. We're supposed to be part of Baron Schenectady's fee, but Scheneck spends his time in New York, and there's nobody to do anything. Kelly has a big castle up near Broadalbin; that'll be where he's taken this poor girl. He hasn't got a title, though at the present rate he's apt to before long—meaning no offense to the nobility," he added hastily. "Gentlemen, have you ever thought of the importance of insurance? My card, if you don't mind. My company has a special arrangement for active men-at-arms—"

Sir Howard and Haas looked at one another, slow grins forming. "Just like in the storybooks," said the knight. "Lyman, I think we might do a little inquiring around about this castle and its super-tough owner. Are you with me?"

"Sure, I'm way ahead of you. They'll be a hardware store open after we finish dinner, won't they? I want to buy some paint. I got an idea."

"We'll need a lot of ideas, my friend. You can't just huff and puff and blow a concrete castle in, you know. Strategy is indicated."

THE HORSE'S hoofs clattered up to the side of the moat; the rider blew a whistle. A searchlight beam stabbed out from the walls, accompanied by a challenge. The light bathed Sir Howard van Slyck and his mount—with a difference. Paul Jones' feet had become white, and his black forehead had developed a big white diamond. On the rider's breastplate the Van Slyck maple-leaf insignia was concealed under a green circle with a black triangle painted in the middle of it. The red-and-white flag was gone from the lance.

"I am Sir William Scranton of Wilkes-Barre!" shouted the knight. (He knew that northeastern Pennsylvania was full of noble Scrantons, and there ought to be several Williams among them.) "I'm passing through, and I've heard of Warren Kelly and should like to make his acquaintance!"

"Wait there," called the watcher. Sir Howard waited, listening to the croak of frogs in the moat and hoping his alias would stand inspection. He was in high spirits. He'd had a moment of qualms about violating his promise to his father, but decided that, after all, rescuing a damsel in distress couldn't be

fairly called "joining up in a local war."

The hinges of the drawbridge groaned as the cables supporting it were unreeled. He clattered into the yard. A blank-faced man said: "I'm Warren Kelly. Pleesed to meetcha." The man was not very big, but quick in his movements. He had a long nose and prominent, slightly bloodshot eyes. He needed a haircut. Sir Howard saw him wince slightly when he squeezed his hand. He thought, why I could knock that little—but wait a minute; he must have something to make himself so feared. He's probably a clever scoundrel.

They were in the hall, and Sir Howard had accepted the offer of a drink. "How's things down your way?" asked Kelly noncommittally. His expression was neither friendly nor otherwise. Sir Howard opened wide the throttle of his famous charm, no mean asset. He didn't want a kicker bolt between the shoulder blades before his enterprise was well started. He gave scraps of such gossip as he heard from Pennsylvania, praised his host's brandy, and told tall tales of the dread in which he had heard Kelly was held. Little by little the man thawed, and presently they were swapping stories. Sir Howard dredged up the foulest he could remember, but Kelly always went him one better. Some of them were a bit strong for even the knight's catholic taste, but he bellowed appreciatively. "Now," said Kelly with a bleak little smile, "let me tell you what we did to that hock-shop guy. This'll kill you; it's the funniest thing you ever heard. You know nitric acid? Well, we took a glass tube, with some glass wool inside for a wick—"

Some of Kelly's men were lounging about, listening to the radio and shooting crap. A bridge game was going in one corner. Sir Howard thought, it's time it happened. I mustn't glance up as if I were expecting something. If this doesn't work— He had no illusions about being able to seize the girl and hew his way through a score of experienced fighting men.

A faint tinkle of glass came from somewhere above. Kelly glanced up, frowned, and went on with his story. Then there was another tinkle. Something fell over and over, to land on the rug. It was a steel-tube arrow with duralumin vanes. The head had been thrust through a small bag of something that burned bluely with a horrible, choking stench.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Kelly, getting up. "Who's the funny guy?" He picked up the arrow, making a face and coughing as he did so. He walked over to the wall and barked into a voice tube: "Hey, you up there! Somebody's dropping sulphur bombs in here. Pick him off, nitwit!" A hollow voice responded something with: "Can't see him." A man was running downstairs with another arrow. "Say, chief, some bastitch shot this into my room, with a sulphur bag on it—"

They were all up now, swearing and wiping their eyes. "All the lousy nerve—" "This'll fumigate the place, anyway. The cockroaches is gettin'—" "Shuddup, lug, the sulphur don't stink no worse'n you." Sir Howard, coughing, pressed his handkerchief to his streaming eyes. Kelly blew three short blasts on the loudest whistle the knight had ever heard.

THE MEN went into action like trained firemen. Doors in the wall were snatched open; behind each door was a suit of armor. The men scrambled into their suits with a speed Sir Howard wouldn't have believed possible. "Wanna come along, Wilkes-Barre?" asked Kelly. "If we catch this guy, I'll show you some real fun. I got a new idea I want to try, with burning pine slivers. Hey, you guys! First squadron only come with me; the rest stay here. Stand to arms: it may be some trick." Then they were half running,

half walking to the court, where their horses already awaited them. They mounted with a great metallic clanging and thundered across the drawbridge.

"Spread out," snapped Kelly. "Butler, you take the north—"

"Yeeeeow!" came a shriek from the darkness. "Damn Yank robbers! Hey, Kelly, who's your father? Betcha don't know yourself!" Then they were off on the Broadalbin road, after a small shadowy form that seemed to float rather than gallop ahead of them.

Sir Howard pulled Paul Jones in slightly, so that man after man pounded past him, meanwhile loudly cursing his puzzled mount for his slowness. By the time they reached a turn he was in the tail. He pulled up sharply and whirled the gelding around on his hind legs—

In three minutes he was back at the castle, giving an excellent imitation of a man reeling in the saddle. Something red was splashed on his suit and on Paul Jones, and dripped from his left solleret to the ground. "Ambush!" he yelled. "Kelly's surrounded just this side of Broadalbin! I was in the tail and cut my way clear!" He gasped convincingly. "Everybody out, quick!" In a minute the castle had disgorged another mob of gangsters. Again the black gelding didn't seem able to keep up with the headlong pace—

This time Sir Howard, when he reached the castle, tethered his mount to a tree outside the moat. There would be a few serving men in the castle yet, and they'd run out to take his horse and ask questions if he rode in. The sentries would be on duty, too. He peered into the dark, and couldn't make out either one on the battlements. It was now or never. Thank God, they'd left the drawbridge down.

The court was empty. So was the hall. So was the dining room. Jeepers, he thought, isn't anybody home? I've got to find at least one man! He tiptoed toward the kitchen, a rather futile performance, as the suit gave out little

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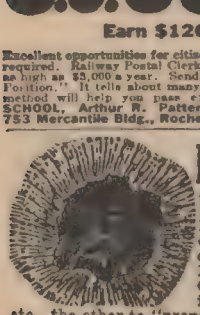

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scrapes and clashings no matter what he did.

Inside the door a fat, sweaty man wearing a high white cap was wiping a glass with a dishtowel. His mouth fell open, and he started to run at the sight of the naked sword, the glass shattering on the tiles. "No, you don't!" growled the knight, and in four long strides he had the cook by the collar and the sword point over the man's right kidney. "One squeak and it'll be your last. Where is everybody?"

"Y-yessir, chef's in bed with a cold, and the others have went to a movie in town."

"Where is she?"

"She? I dunno who you—eek!" The point had been dug in an eighth of an inch. "She's in the guest room on the second floor—"

"All right, show me. March!"

THE guest room had a massive oak door, held shut by a stout Yale lock. The lock was in a bronze mounting, and was evidently designed to keep people in the room rather than out.

"Where's the key?"

"I dunno, sir—I mean, Mr. Kelly's got it—"

Sir Howard thought. He'd been congratulating himself on having thought of everything—and now this! He decided correctly that he'd only get a bruised shoulder trying to break down the door. He didn't know how to pick locks, even assuming that a cylinder lock was pickable. He'd have to hurry—hurry— Was that the hoofs of the returning troop? No, but they might be back any minute. If something happened to Haas—or if the second squadron caught up with the first—

"Lie down on your face next to the door," he snapped.

"Yessir—you won't kill me, sir? I ain't done nothing."

"Not yet, anyway." He rested his sword point on the man's back. "One move, and I'll just lean on this." With his free hand he took out his dagger and began unscrewing the four screws that

GIVE 'EM THE WORKS

held the lock mounting. If only the narrow blade would hold—

It took an interminable time. As the last screw came out, the lock dropped with a soft thump onto the cook. Sir Howard opened the door.

"Who are you?" asked the girl, standing behind a chair. She was rather on the tall side, he thought. That was nice. She wore the conventional pajamalike clothes, and seemed more defiant than frightened. Her lightish hair was cut shorter and her skin was more tanned than was considered fashionable.

"Never mind that; I've come to get you out. Come on, quick!"

"But who are you? I don't trust—"

"You want to get out, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then stow the chatter and come along. Kelly'll be back any minute. I won't eat you. Yeowp, damn, that's done it!" The cook had rolled suddenly to his feet, and his cries of "He-elp!" were diminishing down the corridor. "Come on, for God's sake!"

When they reached the hall, a man in half-armor was coming down the other stair—the one that led to the sentry walk. He was coming two steps at a time, holding a poleax at port arms.

"Stand clear!" Sir Howard flung at the girl, slapping his visor down. A second man had appeared at the head of the stair; the first was halfway across the room. The first lunged with his can opener. Sir Howard swayed his body to let the point go over his shoulder; then their bodies met with a clang. The knight snapped his right fist up to the man's jaw, using the massive sword guard as a knuckle duster. The man went down, and the other was upon him. He was even bigger than Sir Howard, and he brandished his poleax like a switch. At the business end the weapon had a blade like that of a cleaver. From the back side of the blade projected a hook—for pulling men off horses—and from the end extended a foot-long spike.

Sir Howard, skipping away from a stab at his foot, thought, if there's anyone else in the castle this anvil chorus of ours will bring them out quickly. There was a particularly melodious *bonggg* as the blade struck his helmet; he saw stars and wondered whether his neck had been broken. Then the butt end whirled around to trip him. He staggered and went down on one knee; as he started to recover, the point was coming at his visor. He ducked under it and swung. He couldn't hope to cut through the duralumin shaft, but his blade bit into the tendons on the back of the man's unprotected left hand. Now!

But the man, dropping his poleax, was dancing back out of reach, flicking blood from his wounded hand. His sword came out with a *wheep* almost before the knight had regained his feet. Then they were at it again. Feint-lunge-parry-riposte-recover-cut-parry-jab-double-lunge. Ting-clang-swish-bong-zing. Sir Howard, sweating, realized he'd been backing. Another step back—another—the fellow was getting him in a corner. The fellow was a better swordsman than he. Damn! The sentry's point had just failed to slide between the bib and plastron into his throat. The fellow was appallingly good. You couldn't touch him. Another step back—he couldn't take many more or he'd be against the walls.

The girl had picked up one of the light chairs around the card table. She tiptoed over and swung the chair against the back of the sentry's legs. He yelled, threw up his arms, and fell into a ridiculous squatting position, with his hands on the floor behind him. Sir Howard aimed for his face and put his full weight behind the lunge; felt the point crunch through the sinuses.

"The other one!" she cried. The other sentry was on his hands and knees across the room, feeling around for his

weapon. "Hadn't you better kill him, too?"

"No time; run!" They went, *clank, clank, clank,* into the dark. "Never . . . mind . . . him," the knight panted. "Much . . . as . . . I . . . admire . . . your . . . spirit. *Damn!*" He had almost run off the edge of the drawbridge. "Be . . . smart . . . to . . . drown . . . myself . . . in . . . moat . . . now."

V.

"GOOD heavens, I must have slept all morning! What time is it, please, Sir Knight?"

Sir Howard glanced at his wrist, then remembered that his watch was under his gauntlet and vambrace. It was a good watch, and the knight's economical soul would have squirmed at the idea of wearing it outside when there was a prospect of a fight. He got up and looked at the clock built into the pommel of his saddle. "Eleven-thirty," he announced. "Sleep well?"

"Like a top. I suppose your friend hasn't appeared yet?"

Sir Howard looked through the pines at the gently rolling, sandy landscape. Nothing moved in it save an occasional bird. "No," he replied, "but that doesn't mean anything. We're to wait till dark. If he doesn't show up by then we'll move on to—wherever we're going."

The girl was looking, too. "I see you picked a place without a house in sight for your rendezvous. I . . . uh . . . don't suppose there's anything to eat, is there?"

"Nope; and I feel as though I could eat a horse and chase the driver. We'll just have to wait."

She looked at the ground. "I don't mean to look a gift rescuer in the mouth, if you know what I mean . . . but . . . I don't suppose you'd want to tell me your real name?"

Sir Howard came to with a snort. "My real . . . how the devil did you know?"

"I hope you don't mind, but in the

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sunlight you can see that that trademark's been painted on over another one. Even with all that blood on your suit."

Sir Howard grinned broadly. "The gore of miscreants is more beautiful than a sunset, as it says in a book somewhere. I'll make you an offer: I'll tell you my real name if you'll tell me yours!"

It was the girl's turn to start, deny, and interrogate. "Simple, my dear young lady. You say you're Mary Clark, but you have the letters S M embroidered on your blouse, and an S on your handkerchief. Fair enough, huh?"

"Oh, very well, my name is Sarah Waite Mitten. Now how about yours, smarty?"

"You've heard of the Poughkeepsie Van Slycks?" Sir Howard gave a précis of his position in that noble family. As he was doing so, Paul Jones ambled over and poked the girl with his nose. She started to scratch his forehead, but jerked her hand away. "What's *his* name?" she asked. The knight told her.

"Where did you get it?"

"Oh, I don't know; it's been a name for horses in our family for a long time. I suppose there was a man by that name once; an important man, that is."

"Yes," she said, "there was. He was a romantic sort of man, just the sort that would have gone around rescuing maidens from captivity, if there'd been any maidens in captivity. He had a sense of humor, too. Once when the ship he commanded was being chased by an enemy, he kept his ship just out of range, so that the broadsides from the enemy's guns felt just short. Jones posted a man in the stern of his ship with orders to return each broadside with one musket shot. A musket was a kind of light gun they had in those days."

"He sounds like a good guy. Was he handsome, too?"

"Well"—the girl cocked her head to one side—"that depends on the point of view. If you consider apes handsome,

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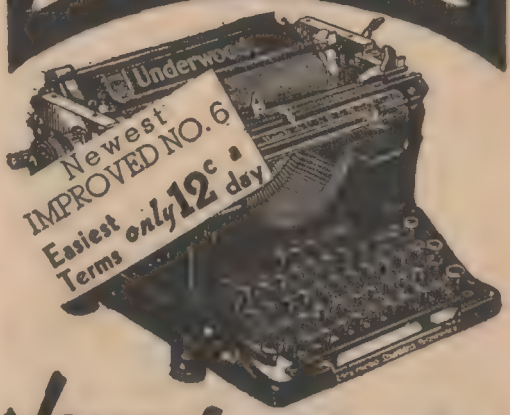

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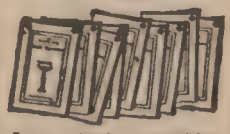

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Paul Jones was undoubtedly good-looking. By the way, I notice that *your* Paul Jones' coloring comes off when you rub him." She held up a paint-smeared hand. The gelding had no desire to be scratched or petted; he was hoping for sugar. As none was forthcoming, he walked off. Sally Mitten continued: "When I first met you, I decided you were just a big, active young man with no particular talents except for chopping up people you didn't like. But the whole way the rescue was planned, and your noticing the initials on my clothes, seem to show real intelligence."

"Thanks. My family never credited me with much brains, but maybe I'll disappoint them yet. It just occurred to me that I needn't have told you who I was; I could have explained the trademark by saying I'd bought this suit secondhand."

"But you'd hardly have repainted your horse, even if he was secondhand, also, would you?"

"Say, you're the damnedest young person. No matter what I say you go me one better." He thought a minute, and asked, "How long were you in Kelly's castle?"

"Three days."

Three days, eh? A lot could happen in that time. But if she wasn't going to tell him about it of her own accord, he certainly wasn't going to ask her. The question was, in fact, never referred to by either again.

"AND where," asked Sir Howard, "did you get all that information about Paul Jones, and the times when men had guns, and so forth?"

"Out of books, mostly."

"Books, huh? I didn't know there were books on those things, unless the hoppers have some. Speaking of the devil—" He tilted his head back to watch a flying machine snore overhead and dwindle to a mote in the cloudless sky. There was the sound of a quickly indrawn breath beside him. He turned to the girl. Her voice was low and intensely serious. "Sir Howard, you've

done me a great service, and you want to help me out, don't you? Well, whatever happens, I don't want to fall into *their* hands. I'd rather go back to Kelly's castle."

"But what—" He stopped. She seemed genuinely frightened. She hadn't been at all frightened of Kelly, he though; merely angry and contemptuous.

"You don't have to worry about me," he reassured her. "I don't like *them*, either." He told her about his brother. "And now," he said, "I'm going to catch a couple of hours' sleep. Wake me if anybody comes in sight."

It seemed to him that he had hardly found a comfortable position before his shoulder was being shaken. "Wake up!" she said. "Wake . . . up . . . oh, confound you, wake . . . up!"

"Haas?" he mumbled, blinking.

"No, one of *them*. I shook you and shook you—"

He got up so suddenly that he almost upset her. His sleepiness was as though it had never been.

The sun was low in the sky. Over the sand and grass a two-wheeled vehicle was approaching the group of pines. Sir Howard glanced at Paul Jones, nibbling contentedly at the tops of timothy weeds. "No use trying to run," he said. "It would see us, and those cycles can go like a lightning flash late for a date. Three or four times as fast as a horse, anyway. We'll have to bluff it out. Maybe it doesn't want us, really."

The vehicle headed straight into the pines and purred to a stop, remaining upright on its two wheels. The rounded lucite top opened, and a hopper got out unhurriedly. The two human beings saluted. They became aware of the faint cheesy odor of the thing.

"You are Sir William Scranton," it chirped.

Sir Howard saw no reason for denying such a flat statement. "Yes, your excellency."

"You killed Warren Kelly last night."

"No, your excellency." The beady black eyes under the leather helmet seemed to bore into him. The pointed face carried no message of emotion. The ratlike whiskers quivered as they always did.

"Do not contradict, Man. It is known that you did."

SIR HOWARD'S mouth was dry, and his bones seemed to have turned to jelly. He who had been in six pitched battles without turning a hair, and who had snatched a robber chief's captive out from under his nose, was frightened. The hopper's clawed hand rested casually on the butt of a small gun in a belt holster. Sir Howard, like most human beings of his time, was terrified of guns. He had no idea of how they worked. A hopper pointed a harmless-looking tool at you, and there was a flash and a small thunderclap, and you were dead with a neat hole the size of your thumb in your plate. That was all. Resistance to creatures commanding such powers was hopeless. And where resistance is hopeless, courage is so rare as to lay the possessor thereof open to the position of having a screw loose.

He tried another tack. "I should have said, your excellency, that I do not *remember* killing Kelly. Besides, the killing of a man is not against the higher law." (He meant hopper law.)

That seemed to stop the hopper. "No," it squeaked. "But it is inconvenient that you should have killed Kelly." It paused, as if trying to think up an excuse for making an arrest. "You lied when you said that you did not kill Kelly. And the higher law is what we say it is." A little breeze made the pines whisper. Sir Howard, chilled, felt that Death was moving among them, chuckling.

The hopper continued: "Something is wrong here. We must investigate you and your accomplice." Sir Howard, out of the corner of his eye, saw

that Sally Mitten's lips were pressed together in a thin red line.

"Show me your travel permit, Man."

Sir Howard's heart seemed likely to burst his ribs at each beat. He walked over to Paul Jones and opened a pocket in the saddle stuffed with papers. He thumbed through them, and selected a tourist-agency circular advertising the virtues of the Thousand Islands. This he handed the hopper.

The creature bent over the paper. The knight's sword whirled and flashed with a *wht* of cloven air. There was a meaty *chug*.

Sir Howard leaned on his sword, waiting for the roaring in his ears to cease. He knew that he had come as near to fainting as he ever had in his life. A few feet away lay the hopper's head, the beady eyes staring blankly. The rest of the hopper lay at his feet, its limbs jerking slightly, pushing the sand up into little piles with its hands and feet. Blue-green blood spread out in a widening pool. A few pine needles gyrated slowly on its surface.

The girl's eyes were round. "What . . . what'll we do now?" she asked. It was barely more than a whisper.

"I don't know. I don't know. I never heard of anything like this before." He took his fascinated gaze away from the cadaver, to look over the dunes. "Look, there's Haas!" His blood began to run warm again. The foreigner might not be able to help much, but he'd be company.

THE Westerner rode up jauntily, his chaps flapping against Queenie's flanks. He called: "Hiya, folks! Had the devil's own time gettin' rid of those lobsters, you call 'em. I had to drown—" He stopped as he saw the hopper, and gave a long whistle. "Well . . . I . . . never. Say, boy, I thought maybe you had nerve, but I never heard of nobody doing *that*. Maybe you'd like to try something safe, like wrassling a grizzly, or tying a knot in a piece of lightning?" He smiled uneasily.

"I had to," said Sir Howard. His composure was restored by the Westerner's awe. He'd mounted the wild stallion of revolt, and there was nothing to do but ride it with what aplomb he could muster. "He asked to see my permit, and I'd have been arrested for trade-mark infringement or something." He introduced Sally Mitten, and gave a résumé of events.

"We've got to get rid of it, quickly," the girl broke in. "When they're out patrolling the way this one was, they report to their station by radio every hour or so. When this one fails to report, the others will start a search for it."

"How will they do that, miss?" asked Haas.

"They'll make a big circle around the place it last reported from, and close in, meanwhile keeping the area under observation from the air."

"Sounds sensible. From what you tell me, this one was on an official mission or something, so his buddies'll have an idea where he was about the time he got whittled. So we'll be inside the circle. How'll we get rid of him? If we just buried him—"

"They might use dogs to locate it," said the girl.

"Well, now if we could sink him in the river or something. This little Hans Creek yonder ain't deep enough."

Sir Howard was frowning at one of the large-scale maps he had bought in Amsterdam the previous evening. "The Sacandaga Reservoir is over across those hills," he said, pointing north.

"No," said Sally Mitten. "We've got to get rid of its cycle, too. You couldn't get it over Maxon Ridge. I know: put it in Round Lake. That's just out of sight east of here."

"Say, miss, do you carry a map of this whole country around in your head?" inquired Haas quizzically.

"I've lived near here most of my life.

We'll put some clean sand and pine needles on the blood spots. And Sir Howard, you'll want to clean your sword blade at the first opportunity."

"Your little lady's O. K., How," said Haas, dismounting. "Only she ain't so little, at that. Fall to, folks. You take his head—I mean his arms; the head comes separate. Don't get any of that blue stuff on you. In we go! It's nice these things stand up on their two wheels even when they ain't moving; it'll make it easy to push."

"Punch some holes in the lucite," said Sally Mitten. "That'll let the vehicle sink more quickly."

"Danged if she doesn't think of everything," said Haas, getting to work with his knife on the thin cowling. He grinned. "How, I'd sure like to hear the other hoppers, if they do find him, trying to figure out what happened to him. If I could understand their canary talk, that is. Say, miss, you got any ideas how to get out of this circle if they start looking before we get away? And which way had we ought to go?"

"I'll show you, Mr. Haas. I think I know how it can be done. And if you desperate characters want to hide out, come with me. I know just the place. We'll have to hurry. Oh, you didn't bring any food with you, did you? I couldn't have eaten anything a few minutes ago, but I'm hungry again, now that *it* is out of sight. And I imagine Sir Howard is, also."

"Danged if I didn't forget. I stopped on the way and got some hot dogs. I figured you might be kinda hollow by now." He produced a couple of Cellophane-wrapped sandwiches. "They'll be kinda dry. But for flavor you might put on a little of that blood How's got on his armor."

The girl looked at the splotches on the suit. Sir Howard, grinning, wiped some of the sticky, almost-dry redness off and put his finger in his mouth. Sally Mitten gulped, looked as though

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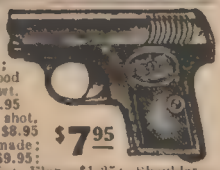

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she were going to gag. But she grimly followed suit. "I'll show you humorists!" Her expression changed ludicrously. "Strawberry jam!" Haas dodged, chortling, as her fist swept past his nose.

VI.

"THERE'S another flier. They're certainly doing a thorough job. Can anybody see whether they've reached the water yet?" It was Sally Mitten speaking. They lay in a clump of pines, looking across the Sacandaga Reservoir, spread out in a placid sheet before them and stretching out of sight to right and left. An early bat zigzagged blackly across the twilight. On the far side of the water, little things like ants moved about; these were hopper vehicles. One by one their lights went on.

"I wish it would get dark more quickly," the girl continued. "This stunt of ours depends on exact timing. They're almost at the water now."

"Too bad we couldn't get farther away before they started hunting," commented Haas. "We might 'a' got outside the circle. Say, How, suppose they do meet up with us. Who'll we be?"

Sir Howard thought. "I registered last at Albany, and gave my destination as Watertown and the Thousand Islands. Said I was going up there to fish, which I thought I was. And the hoppers will be looking for a William Scranton. So maybe I'd just better be myself."

"Maybe," said Haas. "And then, maybe you better get rid of that fake trade-mark. Or will it wash off in the reservoy?"

"No; that's a waterproof lacquer. You need alcohol to get it off."

"Well, what's wrong with that there bottle of snake-bite medicine you got in your saddle?"

"What? But that's good whiskey! Oh, very well, I suppose this is more important." Sir Howard regretfully got out the bottle. Haas found a sock in his duffel bag that was more hole than fabric, opined that it was purty near

wore out, anyway, and went to work on the knight's plastron. "Say," he said, "how do you reckon you're gonna swim over half a mile in that stovepiping?"

"He isn't," said Sally Mitten. "We're going to strip."

"Wha-a-t?" The Westerner's scandalized voice rose in pitch. "You mean go swimmin' all nekkid—all three of us?"

"Certainly. You don't think we want to go running around on a cold night in wet clothes, do you? Or run into a hopper and have to explain how we got wet?"

Haas turned back to his work, clucking. "Well, I never. I never. I knowed Yanks was funny people, but I never. It just shows you. Say, miss, you *sure* we couldn't get away by going around the end of the reservoy?"

"Good heavens, no. They'll be thickest around there. The whole idea is that the one time when there'll be a gap in the circle will be when they reach the water on the other side, and the ones who come up on the shore will separate, half of them going around each end of the reservoir, to re-form their circle on this side. If we're in the water when that happens, and it's dark enough so they don't see us, we'll find ourselves outside the circle automatically."

"How we gonna get How's tin suit across if he don't wear it? The cayuses'll be purty well loaded down as 'tis."

"We'll make a raft. You can cut some of the little pines and tie them together with those ropes of yours."

"Guess we could at that. There, How, your breastplate's O. K. I guess it's dark enough so they wouldn't see us moving around, huh?" He got up, took out his saber, and began lopping branches from a sapling.

The knight did likewise. "Wish I had my ax along," he said. "I didn't want to load Paul Jones down with too much junk. How big do we want this raft?"

"How heavy's your suit?"

"Forty-two pounds. Then there's my lance—we don't want that sticking up like a mast from its boot—and my sword, and all our clothes."

"Better make it four by four, with two courses."

"Hurry," said Sally Mitten. "They're at the shore now; I can see the reflection of their lights on the water."

"WHO was it you drowned, Lyman?" asked Sir Howard.

"Oh, that. I had the dangedest time with those fellas. They was fast, in spite of their hardware. And the little one up front, who was ordering the rest around, could ride like the devil hisself. He had a flashlight and kept it on me. I kept going until Queenie began to puff, and I seen they was still coming. So— What's that little river that runs through Broadalbin?"

"Kenneatto Creek," Sally Mitten told him.

"Well, when I got to a little bridge that goes over this Kenny . . . Kenneatto Creek—here, How, you pull tight on the end of that rope—I turned off into the water. I found a place under some trees where it was nice and dark, with the water about up to Queenie's belly. And then when these here lobsters hit the bridge I roped this little guy in the lead. He went off just as nice as you please into the creek. He was in about ten foot of water with that armor on. The only bad thing was I had to cut my good rope and leave most of it in the creek, because if I'd held it tight he might 'a' pulled hisself out with it, and his pals was beginning to hunt around to see why their boss went into the drink, naturally. I bought some more rope at a store on the way back to Round Lake. But I don't like it. It don't handle quite the same as a Western rope. I gotta practice up with it. And this holding a raft together won't do it no good."

"I see," said Sir Howard. "That's why the hoppers think I killed Warren Kelly. They don't know about you, but they knew I'd called at the castle—at least, that somebody calling himself William Scranton did."

"You mean I drowned the big tough guy hisself? You don't say! I guess that raft's O. K. now. Look, miss, we'll put it on How's saddle, and you balance it while we lead the critters."

TEN MINUTES later there was a metallic twang in front. Sir Howard called back softly: "It's a wire fence; looks about ten feet high. I guess we couldn't see it from up on the bluff."

"That's nice," said Haas. "We should 'a' remembered that folks put fences around reservoys to keep critters from going and dying in 'em. Don't suppose anybody's got any wire cutters?"

"No," hissed the knight. "We'll have to use that hunting knife of yours."

"What? Hey, you can't do that! It'll ruin the blade!"

"Can't be helped. I've spoiled the point of my dagger getting Miss Mitten's door in the castle opened, so you oughtn't to kick."

The knife was passed up, and there were low grunts in the dark from the knight as he heaved, and twang after twang as the strands gave.

"All right," he whispered. "If we pull the horses' heads down we can get 'em through. Take my toothpick out of the boot, will you?"

They were through. Sir Howard said: "Come here, Lyman, and hold these wires while I twist the ends back together. No use advertising to *them* which way we've gone."

"Quiet," said Sally Mitten. "Sound carries over water, you know. Hurry up; the hoppers are going off toward the ends of the reservoir. I can tell by their lights." On the far shore the little needles of light were, in fact, moving off to right and left.

"SAY, miss," came Haas's plaintive murmur, "can't I leave my underwear on? I'm a modest man."

"No, you can't," snapped the girl. "If you do, you'll catch pneumonia, and I'll have to nurse you. There's nothing but starlight, anyway."

"I'm c-cold," continued the Westerner. "How's gonna take all night getting that hardware off."

Sir Howard looked up from his complicated task to see two ghostly forms standing over him, hugging themselves and hopping up and down to keep warm. "You go ahead and fix the ropes," he said. "I'll be ready with this in a few minutes. I have to be careful how I pile the pieces or I'm liable to lose parts of it."

The preparations were finally complete. The raft, piled with steel and garments, lay on the sand, connected to Queenie's saddle by a long rope. Another rope trailed from Paul Jones.

"All right, get!" Sir Howard slapped the gelding's rump and waded into the water. He and Sally Mitten each held the rope. Haas did likewise with the mare. The horses didn't want to swim, and had to be prodded and pulled. But they were finally in deep water, the ropes with their burdens trailing behind.

Sir Howard was thinking how warm the water gurgling in his right ear was when something hit him in the left eye. "Damn!" he whispered. "Trying to blind me?"

"What did I do?" came the answer from up ahead.

"Stuck your toe in my eye. Why don't you keep on your own side of the rope?"

"I *am* on my own side. Why don't you keep your face out of my foot?"

"So that's it, huh? I'll fix you, young lady! You're not ticklish, are you?" He pulled himself forward hand over hand. But the girl dived like a seal. Holding the rope, the knight raised his head to peer over the starlit water. Then

two slim but startlingly strong hands caught his ankles and dragged him under.

When he came up and shook the water out of his head he heard a frantic hiss from Haas: "For gossake, cut out the water-polo game, you two. You sound like a coupla whales on a drunk!"

They were silent. The only sounds, besides the little night noises of insect and frog, were the heavy breathing of the horses and the gurgle of water sliding past them.

Time ticked past slowly. The shore seemed to get no closer. Then suddenly it looked before them, and they were touching bottom. After the quiet, the splashing of the horses through the shallows sounded like Niagara.

THEY LAY on the beach. Sally Mitten said: "Can you see?" She was making marks in the sand. "Here's the reservoir, and here we are. My people and I live up in the Adirondacks. Now we can get there this way, by the Sacandaga Lakes. There's a good road up to Speculator and Piseco. But there's lots of traffic for just that reason. People going up to fish on the Sacandaga Lakes. And we want to be seen as little as possible. We'd better stay on this side of the Sacandaga River and follow the west branch to Piseco Lake. Then I know a trail from there to our place by way of the Cedar Lakes. It's hard going, but we're not likely to meet anybody.

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"How do you get to Amsterdam?" asked Sir Howard. "That looks like a pretty long walk."

"It is; I have a bicycle. I mean I *had* a bicycle. The last I saw of it it was standing on the sidewalk at Amsterdam.

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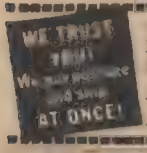

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It'll be gone by now. And I left my only decent hat at Kelly's castle. It's a good two-day trip. It'll take us much longer, since we're not following the good roads." She carefully rubbed out the map. "We'll want to obliterate our tracks on the beach, and the horses', too."

"Why do you suppose the hoppers are so concerned about Kelly?" he asked. "They don't usually interfere in man-to-man quarrels."

"Don't you know? They were backing him. Not openly; they don't do things that way. Schenectady's barony was getting too big, so they set Kelly up in business to break it up. *Divide et impera.*"

"What?"

"Divide and rule. That's their whole system—keeping men split up into little quarreling States the size of postage stamps."

"Hm-m-m. You seem to know a lot about *them.*"

"I've been studying *them* for a long time."

"I suppose so. What you say gives me a lot to think about. Say, do you suppose your . . . uh . . . people will want to have a couple of strangers dropping in on them? Especially strangers with our fearful records?"

"On the contrary, Sir Howard—"

"I'd rather you dropped the 'Sir.'"

"Yes? Any particular reason?"

"Well—I don't know just how to say it, but . . . uh . . . it seems rather silly. I mean, we're all comrades together. Uh . . . you and Haas are as good men as I am, if you know what I mean, in the time I've known you."

"I think I understand." She was smiling quietly in the dark. "What I was saying was, you and he are just the sort of people we're looking for: men who have dared raise their hands against *them.* There aren't many. It sets you apart from other people, you know. You couldn't ever quite go back to the way you were."

While they talked, the stars had been dimming. And now a mottled yellow

disk was rising from behind the blackness of the skyline, washing their skins with pale gold.

"Good heavens," said Sally Mitten, "I forgot about the moon! We'll have to get dressed and get out of here, quickly. I'm dry, thank goodness. Lyman—why, he's asleep!" The Westerner lay prone, his head pillowed on his arm, his breath coming with little whistlings.

"You can't blame him," said Sir Howard. "It's his first in thirty-six hours. But I'll fix *that*." He leaned over the recumbent form and raised his arm, the hand open and slightly cupped. Sally Mitten grabbed his wrist. "No! That'll make a noise like a gunshot! They'll hear it in Amsterdam!" She gurgled with suppressed laughter. "But it does seem a shame to waste such a chance, doesn't it?"

"YOU'RE limping, Howard," said Sally Mitten. She was sitting in his saddle, with the bottoms of her trousers gathered in by string tied around her ankles. Behind her the knight's armor, the pieces neatly nested together and lashed into a compact bundle, rode Paul Jones' broad rump. The pile of steel gave out little tinny noises.

"No, I'm not," he said. "At least, not much. It's just another blister." He was walking in front of his horse, wearing a pair of riding boots from which four days of plowing through Adirondack brush had permanently banished the shine, and using his lance as an overgrown walking stick. He wore a red béret pulled down over his ears. Lyman Haas brought up the rear, swaying easily in the saddle and rolling a cigarette. Though the temperature was nearly eighty, all three wore gloves (Sally Mitten's being several sizes too large) and had their shirt collars turned up. They slapped constantly at their faces.

"Just another blister! You stop right now, young man, and we'll fix it. Have you any bandages? You don't do any more walking today. Those breeches and boots are all very well for riding, but not for walking around these parts."

"It's nothing, really. Besides, it's my turn to walk. The schedule says I walk for half an hour yet."

"Get your lasso out, Lyman; he's going to be stubborn."

"Better do what the lady says," said Haas. "Sure, miss, he's got iodine and gauze in one of the pockets of that saddle. That there's a magic saddle. You just wish, and say hocus-pocus, and push a button, and whatever you want pops out. You see why How uses an outsize horse; no ordinary critter could carry all that stuff. I sometimes think maybe he oughta rented an elephant from the railroad."

"Just like the White Knight," said Sally Mitten. "And me without even a toothbrush of my own!"

"The who?" asked Sir Howard.

"The White Knight; a character in a book called 'Through the Looking Glass.' Does your equipment include any mousetraps or beehives? His did."

"That a fact?" said Haas. "Sounds to me like the guy was plumb eccentric. Now, How, you brace your other foot on this here root and I'll pull. Unh!" The boot came off, revealing two large toes protruding through a hole in the sock. "Say," said the Westerner, sniffing, "you sure that foot ain't *dead?* Damn!" He slapped at his cheek.

"I should have warned you it was black-fly time," said Sally Mitten. "They'll be gone in a few weeks."

"I haven't got a mousetrap," said Sir Howard, "but I have a clockwork mechanical razor and a miniature camera, if they'll do. And a pair of bird glasses. You know, my hobby's prowling around looking for yellow-billed cuckoos and golden-winged warblers. My brother Frank used to say it was my only redeeming trait." He slapped at his jaw, decorated with streaks of dried blood

from fly bites. "Perhaps I ought to have kept my suit on. It would at least keep these bugs out, unless they can bite through steel." He slapped again. "This trail is more like a jungle than any I ever saw. Why doesn't somebody get an ax and a scythe and clean it out?"

Sally Mitten answered: "That's just the point. If it were a nice clear trail everybody'd use it, and we don't want that. We've even planted things on trails we didn't want people to use."

Haas said: "It's thicker'n any brush I ever seen. It's different out my way; the timber, what they is, grows nice and far apart, so you can get through it 'thout being a snake." He lit his cigarette and went on: "This is what you call mountains, is it? I'm afraid you Yanks don't know what real mountains are. You take that Mr. Orrey you showed me; in Wyoming we wouldn't bother to give a little molehill like that a name, even. Say, Miss, have we got much more swamps to wade through? It's a wonder to me how you can walk around at night in this country 'thout falling into some mudhole or pond. I'd think the folks would have growed web feet, like a duck."

"No," said Sally Mitten, "we're through with the Cedar Lakes. If you look through the trees up ahead you can see Little Moose Mountain. That's where we're going." She slapped her neck.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

Strange Worlds

by Don A. Stuart

WE'RE bound and blinded here by the same thing that gives us life; we trust our flesh too much, perhaps. I've seen a world with other eyes, a world where the sky's black pall presses down on strange trees, bent and twisted things with gray boles and cotton-white leaves. A river of ink flowed between salt-white banks into an inky sea. Strange manlike shapes that glowed with shifting luminosity walked across a field spotted with animals that burned with ghostly light, and only snakes and crawling things were black. A silver mirror did not reveal my face, and the inky pools of the river showed me no reflection.

For I saw with the infrared eyes of a camera.

A homing pigeon turns bewildered, baffled and uncertain, when the thing we know only by a radio receiver floods its strange directive sense. Somehow the radio broadcast makes it lose all its strange power of direction. It has some other sense than those we know; more than that we cannot understand.

Our senses loop in a deceiving circle, seeing infrared, at the deepest red of the spectrum, as black—and showing the farthest, most brilliant violets as black. And at the farthest red and highest violet they close the circle—and call them both red-violet. The eyes close our sight beyond those ranges, circling back to trick us with the false concept that they see all colors, all there is, without a break.

Our ears fail far below the level of many insect notes. There is a world of life and sound beyond our knowing.

And Man accepts as all there is those things his senses choose to show him!

Strange worlds, whole universes, exist

beyond those smugly closed boundaries, beyond the circling fence our own deceiving eyes weave around us. "It cannot be—I've never seen it!" And the closed circle of our vision shuts it out!

Faintly, dimly, men perceive things in some other way, a sense so delicate, so weak, it cannot serve us forcefully and with assurance, cannot even make us know how we have perceived it. Telepathy and clairvoyance—the reading of minds, and the perceiving of things without the intervention of the eye. Science hardly recognizes that these powers exist; tends uneasily to deny them till some logic makes the mechanical and predictable.

The ghostly image on a camera plate led to the finding of radium, the atom that shattered, and, shattering itself, shattered a whole structure of theories of the universe. Science missed it, lacked an essential bit of knowledge that went to the shaping of the universe.

It lacks an explanation of telepathy, of clairvoyance, that makes these things understandable in terms of other things we know. But had men "not believed in" radium until it fitted in with the things then known, it would be still a myth!

There was a time when men did "not believe in" hypnotism. It was something from the discarded pages of the stupid books of black magic, books where goblins, unicorns, griffins, witches and demons stalked. Obiviously, because it rubbed shoulders with such rubbish, it was fantasy. Those who tried to use it found, perhaps, that they could not, and reported, "It can't be done—I can't do it."

Now, all that is, to each of us, is that our minds perceive. But the brain is a blind, gray thing, shut away forever from the outer world, itself so helpless, so senseless, it cannot feel pain. Any reality the world can have to us must be brought in and made apparent to this gray stuff that barely seems to live. But each man is a world to himself, each brain and mind shut off behind its wall of flesh and gray bone—and each

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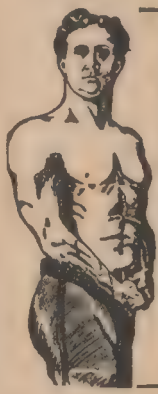

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mind is, itself, all the world it knows, each a strange, lone world that must conceive for itself some picture of that outer universe. And all its senses lie.

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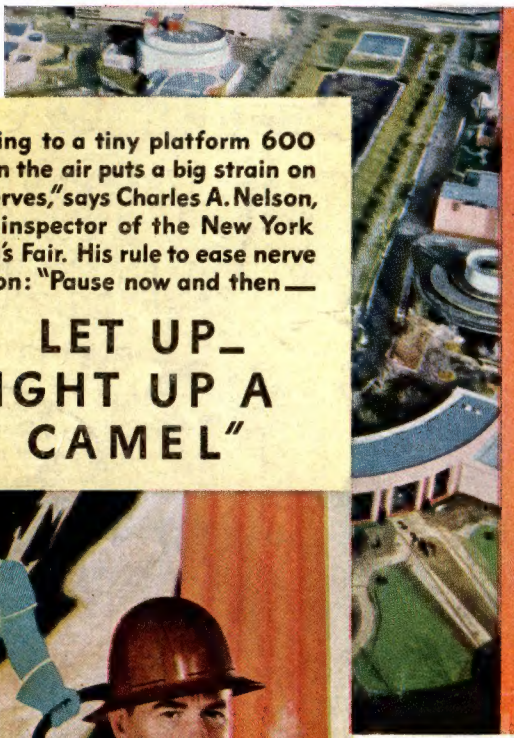

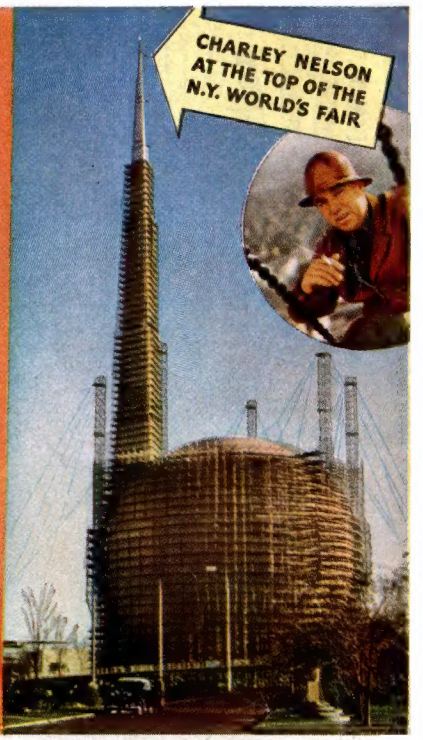

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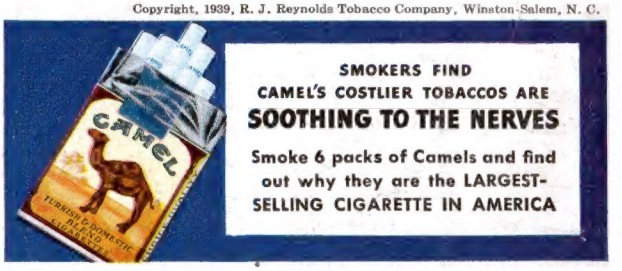

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